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Drake's Fortune
Reviewed: PS3's game of the year?



Too Human
A Diablo for the 360 generation



Writing fantasy
Steve Jackson on a life making games

WINTER GAMES

Super Mario Galaxy sets the pace for the gaming calendar's blockbuster season



Noby Noby Boy
Inside the weird world of Katamari Damacy's sequel



Pajitnov's progress
Tetris' creator talks puzzlers – and why Bejeweled makes him angry

REVIEWED CRYSIS **ASSASSIN'S CREED** MASS EFFECT **BEOWULF** KANE & LYNCH **ZACK & WIKI** THE WITCHER BLADESTORM **CASTLEVANIA: DRACULA X CHRONICLES** TIMESHIFT **SILENT HILL ORIGINS** HELLGATE: LONDON CALL OF DUTY 4 **MUTANT STORM EMPIRE** TONY HAWK'S PROVING GROUND **GUITAR HERO III** THE SIMPSONS





As one of this issue's letters nostalgically recalls, there was a time when most of us depended on Christmas as the provider of a feast of new games. Whether these were the latest 3D arcade extravaganzas reworked via some arcane strain of beardy magic to fit on wobbly ZX Spectrum cassettes, futuristic Amiga floppies or reassuringly sturdy Sega Master System cartridges, they were special because they arrived in number, and because software publishers' habits ensured that they would be the biggest games of the year, based on the highest-profile properties and assembled by the most talented teams (or so you hoped; by all the gods did you hope). Nowadays, of course, few **Edge** readers need to depend on gifts to feed their habits. But you still have to wait for the end of the year to roll into view in order to see the likes of *Super Mario Galaxy*, *Assassin's Creed*, *Drake's Fortune*, *Crysis*, *Call Of Duty 4*, *Mass Effect* and more and more and more turn up.

There has never been an end-of-year game explosion like this one. The quality, thanks to the likes of Nintendo's best Wii game to date (see p76), is of a different standard to what we saw in, say, 2006, but the quantity, too, is slightly scary. Lots of these games will fail to recoup their budgets. Many, many thousands of pounds will be wasted on marketing. Let's be honest: the games on which you may have taken a gamble at another, quieter time of year stand little to no chance of making an impression in this climate.

And what happens to the games that actually succeed in selling? Well, let's say you're one of the many **Edge** readers with a Wii, PS3 and 360. Let's say you buy *Galaxy*, *Drake's Fortune* and *Call Of Duty 4*. That's on top of *The Orange Box*, which you still haven't exhausted. And don't forget multiplayer *Halo 3*, which you've been neglecting. And it's Christmas, after all, so what about *SingStar* PS3 or perhaps *Guitar Hero III*? The cost isn't the issue – it's all about being able to give these games the time they deserve. As problems go, it's not a bad one to have. And if you find a solution, please do share it with the rest of us.



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Printed in the UK by Benham Goodhead Print, Bicester
Covers printed by Stones The Printers, Banbury
Distributed in the UK by Seymour Distribution Ltd
2 East Poultry Avenue, London, EC1A 9PT
0207 429 4000

"Later, dudes! Let 'er rip! Hang ten..."

A member of the Audit Bureau of Circulations
30,021
January-June 2007

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Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR). www.futureplc.com

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PRODUCTION OF EDGE
Hardware: Power Macintosh G5
Software: Adobe InDesign, Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator and Microsoft Office
Typography: (Adobe®) Frutiger Light, Regular, Bold, Black, Italic. Max (TF/LF) Light, Regular, Semi-Bold, Bold, Black, Italic. Simian (Display/Text) Orangutan, Chimpanzee, Gorilla. QType Book&B, Medium, Bold, Italic. Prensa Book, Bold, Italic. Bad Excuse, Bad Excuse Solid

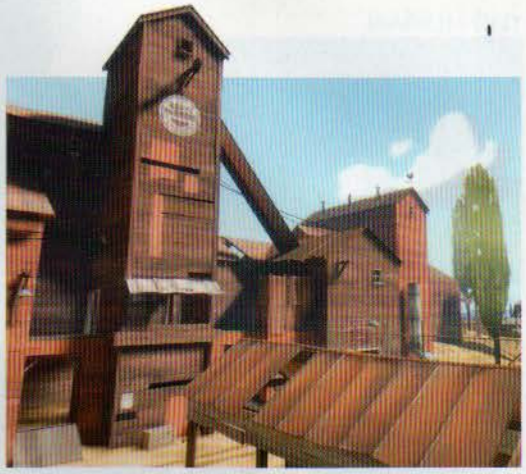
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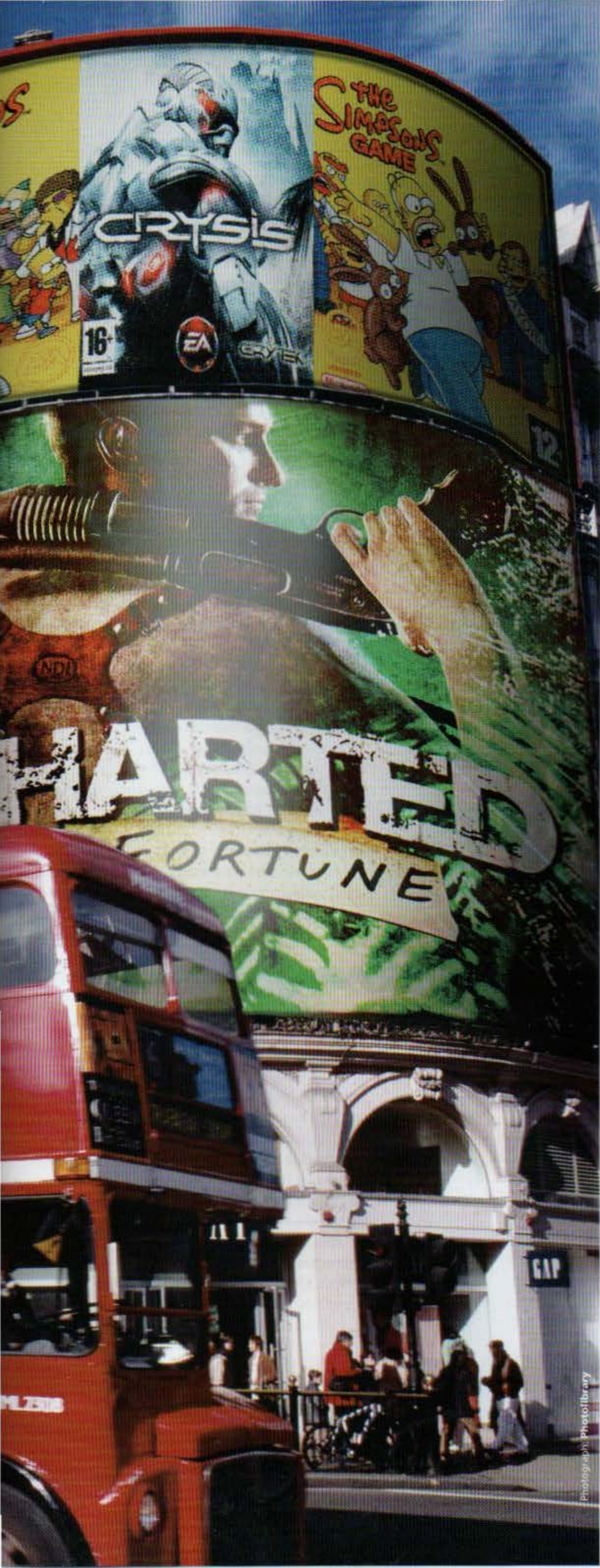
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RETAIL

Christmas presence

Budgets are spiralling to never-before-seen levels in the race to promote 2007's end-of-year blockbusters



On its release in September, *Halo 3* set a new precedent for the scope, reach and budget of videogame marketing, with £4 million assigned to the UK campaign to cover the advertising spectrum

This console generation has been full of surprises. But the volume of new games surging towards retailers this Christmas, while arguably of a higher overall quality than ever before, is not entirely unexpected.

Christmas has long been the crucial selling period for videogames, but 2007's is the first one in which all three of the current generation of consoles have boasted established global audiences. Higher average unit sales mean it's becoming easier for publishers to make profits, yet with early adopters still dominating the audience it's the ideal time for launching new IPs, too. And, for once, the industry has responded, with the likes of *Assassin's Creed*, *Mass Effect*, *Drake's Fortune*, *Haze* and *Kane & Lynch* among the many debuting as the year concludes.

In short, the baton has passed from hardware to software, with most publishers now on to their second wave of games for each platform. As Games Investor Consulting's **Rick Gibson** says, these titles have benefited from more development time, effort and budget in anticipation of greater sales from larger installed bases and better exploitation of the host consoles' capabilities.

"In the case of AAA titles, these are long-range, two- to three-year bets made by publishers based on their estimated arrival of a console's installed base," Gibson says. "The delay in and price of PlayStation 3 means that many games were started when the PS3 was anticipated to be further ahead than it now is."

Publishers are cagey about revealing marketing



What and when

The games in contention for this year's top spot

FIFA 08 (EA), out now; ***The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass* (Nintendo), out now**; *Buzz!* (SCEE), out now; ***Halo 3* (Microsoft), out now; *PGR 4* (Microsoft), out now;** *The Orange Box* (EA), out now; ***TimeShift* (Vivendi), out now;** *PES 2008* (Konami), out now; ***The Simpsons Game* (EA), out now;** *Tony Hawk's Proving Ground* (Activision), out now; ***Hellgate: London* (EA), out now;** *Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Activision), out now; ***Ratchet & Clank: Tools Of Destruction* (SCEE), out now;** *Crysis* (EA), out now; ***Super Mario Galaxy* (Nintendo), out now;** *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft), out now; ***Haze* (Ubisoft), November 23;** *Mass Effect* (Microsoft), November 23; ***Guitar Hero III: Legends Of Rock* (Activision), November 23;** *Kane & Lynch: Dead Men* (Eidos), November 23; ***Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Games* (Sega), November 23;** *Need For Speed ProStreet* (EA), November 23; ***Stranglehold* PS3 (Midway), November 30;** *Pokémon Battle Revolution* (Nintendo), December 7; ***Rock Band* (EA/MTV), winter '07;** *SingStar* PS3 (SCEE), December 10.



Anatomy of a hit

Ubisoft lines up a killer campaign for Assassin's Creed

"We're fortunate that *Assassin's Creed* is completely different to anything else out there," says James O'Reilly, group brand manager at Ubisoft. "It affords us the luxury of letting the game talk for itself."

Putting its money where *Assassin's Creed*'s mouth is, Ubisoft is marshalling its biggest ever UK marketing campaign, including a TV commercial consisting entirely of in-game footage – an overlooked benefit of those escalating development dollars. Here's what it takes to compete at Christmas 2007:

TV: In-game footage set to music by Massive Attack running on ITV1, Channel 4, Five and others.

Print: A two-month specialist and lifestyle print campaign across the official PlayStation and Xbox magazines, Total Film, Empire, SFX, Stuff, Loaded, Nuts, Zoo, Sport Magazine and T3.

Online: A six-week campaign covering the likes of C&VG, Games Radar, Gamespot, IGN, Monkey (ezine), Empire, FHM, MyMovies, The Sun, Zoo, Maxim, Sky Sports and Google.

PR: Multiple features and previews in the gaming press, selected front cover 'reveals' with more at release. Editorial 'takeover' features on key sites such as C&VG, Games Radar, IGN and Gamespot. Mainstream-focused PR has yielded national TV spots such as BBC1's Breakfast on Saturday, BBC2's Working Lunch, Channel 5's The Gadget Show and developer interviews on Radio 1, Radio 5, Choice FM and others. Ubisoft also points to big previews in men's lifestyle media such as T3, Boys Toys, Loaded, Maxim, FHM, Nuts and Zoo, and claims lead reviews will follow.

Trade marketing: Ubisoft's largest ever trade campaign.

Other highlights: An ongoing affiliate marketing scheme at www.1191ad.co.uk; full *Assassin's Creed* branding on a quarter of a million LoveFilm DVD rental envelopes, plus 1.7 million LoveFilm website impressions; on release day, *Assassin's Creed* will become the first ever videogame to secure The Guardian Film & Music supplement's cover wrap, with six pages of content inside.



Pre-Christmas marketing activity across print and online (above) ranges from subtle to not-so-subtle. Microsoft's Xbox 360 campaign, in particular, gets straight to two points: range and value



budgets, but by way of illustration Sony recently told retailers that it is spending £1 million on promoting *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* in the UK alone. Unprecedented sums are at stake. Rick Gibson's business partner Nick Gibson estimates the average title now costs $10-15 million to develop. With publishers currently aiming to spend ten to 15 per cent of a game's net receipts on promotion, the biggest Christmas titles are being backed by a worldwide marketing campaign of around $15 million (£7m) each, which is why it'll be hard to escape game ads over the next few months. Having invested so much already, publishers won't hold back this Christmas.

> **"Halo 3 commanded the attention of the mass market and we expect Super Mario Galaxy to continue educating the consumer as to the benefits of the current generation of home consoles"**

"The list of high-quality games is certainly much longer than in previous years and makes the next few months very exciting," says **Scott Wood**, senior product manager at Vivendi Games, who believes gamers can only benefit from this push toward quality. "Publishers are certainly much more aware of the need to produce games that deliver a high-quality experience rather than just churning out substandard titles year after year." Vivendi has just launched *TimeShift* into the fray. "We know it's going to be tough for a new IP this Christmas," admits Wood, "but the game has received good press and will have a strong presence at retail."

This is echoed by **James O'Reilly**, group brand manager at Ubisoft: "It's going to be a golden period for the consumer, with a variety of great games to choose from on the next-gen platforms – I'm looking forward to a number of titles but struggling to work out how I'll find the time to play them all! Fortunately, the majority of key titles are very different to one another."

No one genre or style will dominate the December charts, something that the variety that comes with Wii software can only support. UK-based research body Screen Digest has predicted that Wii will lead the market as 2007 closes, thanks to its exclusive titles.

"*Halo 3* commanded the attention of the mass market and we expect *Super Mario Galaxy* for Wii to continue the process of educating the consumer as to the benefits of the current generation of home consoles," says **Ed Barton**, Screen Digest's games analyst. "Given the platform's release schedule this Christmas, it's not a surprise that Sony is focusing on lowering the cost of entry to PlayStation 3 to maintain parity with its rivals."

It's this intersection of both hardware and software fortunes that makes Christmas 2007 as fascinating to anticipate as it will be fun to play through. In a year the outcome of the hardware battle will likely be decided, and we'll know which new games we can expect sequels to before PlayStation 4 comes knocking. But, right now, anything is possible.

"The competition will be intense, and no doubt many publishers will be breathing a sigh of relief that *GTA4* is delayed, and that *Halo 3* – which will have a long, fat tail – launched earlier in the year," reflects Rick Gibson. "I suspect that, in the thick of the fray, some publishers will lose out because the consoles' installed bases, while growing fairly healthily, are not at the sweet spot we'll see in 12 to 18 months."



Nintendo's tactic to extend DS's mainstream sales juggernaut still further is to employ British household favourites Julie Walters and Patrick Stewart, Fern Britton and Phillip Schofield, and Zoe and Johnny Ball to publicise the Touch! Generations range. They feature in TV and print as well as outdoor billboard advertising



The campaigners

How some of the biggest games are aiming to capture hearts and minds this Christmas

Mass Effect



With an already hugely anticipated title the aim is to convert buzz into preorders before Christmas money is spent elsewhere. Microsoft's *Mass Effect* gameplan includes a two-month ad campaign across the specialist press, lifestyle advertising in film and sci-fi publications, and a heavy retail presence including A2 posters, oversized dummy boxes and inlays. It has been promoted online for a while, but Microsoft is promising blanket coverage from launch across all the major gaming and sci-fi websites. (Reviewed: p86.)

TimeShift



Introducing new IP to the market is never easy but it is vital for gaming's progress. Vivendi claims the gaming press supported the delays in *TimeShift*'s development; now Christmas punters need convincing, with the main aim of the just-started TV campaign to get across the player's in-game timeshifting abilities. Covering terrestrial and satellite TV, the adverts support online and print campaigns running throughout November, while an online push stretches from specialist game sites to casual outlets such as FHM: (Reviewed: p97.)

Stranglehold



The John Woo factor undoubtedly helped Midway secure *Stranglehold*'s 40 front covers in the European press. Launching on PS3 just in time for the Christmas ruckus with what Midway says is one of its biggest ever marketing spends for an internally developed game, the campaign encompasses TV, PR and advertising in the lifestyle and specialist media. High-profile promotional schemes include exclusive Xbox 360 faceplates supplied with preorders, and online giveaways such as a limited number of copies signed by Mr Woo himself.

Uncharted: Drake's Fortune



Sony Computer Entertainment UK has claimed that it will spend £1 million in the UK marketing its big blockbuster hope, *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*, this Christmas. It's the fourth PS3 game to which SCE UK has given a six-figure budget this year. TV advertising – all the game footage for which was recorded directly from a PlayStation 3 – will target the 16-to-34 demographic during November and December, with other initiatives planned including a special editorial feature in Empire magazine and an extensive online campaign. (Reviewed: p80.)

SingStar PS3



Like stablemate *Buzz!*, Sony's *SingStar* has broken out of the fire-and-soon-flounder lifecycle of most games. Still, it doesn't take a marketing genius to see how important the season of gift-giving is for the accessible offering with its bundled microphones. Following outings in London and Manchester, Sony will take its SingStar Studios concept to the O2 Arena, where gamers can book *SingStar* booths for free and get professional makeup and props, while online activity includes a MySpace campaign (www.myspace.com/singstarvip).

Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Games



Mario & Sonic At The Olympic Games will get off the mark with Sega's biggest ever TV campaign, with additional TV support from Nintendo. Released this Christmas exclusively for Wii, with a DS version to follow next year, the TV campaign will see the title promoted from mid-November through to the end of the year. "This should ensure it tops the Wii charts at launch," predicts **Grant Gie**, Sega's UK marketing manager, though the company feels that, in fact, it has a good chance of topping the all-formats chart on the basis that this is a natural follow-up to *Wii Sports*.

The Golden Compass



Having the biggest movie licence in a crowded Christmas is clearly helpful – Sega says it will be 'disappointed' if *The Golden Compass* doesn't top the PlayStation 2 chart, at least – but it doesn't mean the publisher can skimp on marketing: those film rights don't come cheap, and the IP doesn't yet have quite the clout that the likes of Lord Of The Rings enjoys. The campaign for the seven-format-spanning title includes cinema and TV spots, on-pack promotions with an ice cream and drinks manufacturer, and a Burger King promotion running into 2008.

PES 2008



Leading sports games like *PES 2008* sell all year, but launch and the seasonal period are still important – *PES 6* sold a million copies in just four days in 2006, and football games are a prime gift for parents to give their children. Konami's multimillion-euro campaign aims to show the human side of football's megastars. TV advertising is up and running, supported by bespoke viral interviews with *PES* pack stars Michael Owen and Cristiano Ronaldo. Konami has also secured a presence on ground hoardings at key fixtures and in club programmes.

The Simpsons Game



As if claiming the best-selling game for the last four Christmases wasn't enough, it looks like EA will again be gracing the top of the charts this year, too, whether with *Need For Speed ProStreet* (bookmaker Paddy Power has it odds on for number one), *FIFA 2008* (which is close behind) or *The Simpsons Game*. *The Simpsons Game* has an outside chance, but with a "major presence across TV, radio, online, outdoor and press," according to product manager **Alice Brandvik**, it will have a ubiquitous presence in the media. (Reviewed: p92.)

Three wise men

How console manufacturers see the season shaping up

"We're extremely excited about the number of AAA titles out there, and more importantly available on Xbox 360, in the run up to Christmas. There's never been a console line-up like it in history, and this is only a good thing for the consumer. With a very attractive price point of £199.99, we're feeling very good about Christmas this year. The games largely do the talking themselves. This is amplified by our Blockbuster campaign, where all the best titles are only available on Xbox 360. Expect to see a comprehensive TV, print and online campaign around this."
Stephen McGill, head of gaming and entertainment, E&DD, at Microsoft UK

"We now have titles which truly start to capitalise on the power of PlayStation 3 – most recently with *Heavenly Sword* and soon with *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune, Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools Of Destruction* and *SingStar*.

"Getting consumers to experience our products in the best possible environment is one way we hope to achieve cut-through in this seasonally busy period. Our brand space 3ROOMS form the core of educating consumers in a great lifestyle setting. We're also running a national PlayStation 3 UK tour in major shopping centres, universities and train stations."
Adam Boita, SCE UK marketing manager

"This Christmas offers us at Nintendo our greatest chance to appeal to as broad an audience as possible, with both Wii and DS and our marketing campaigns reflecting this opportunity. The use of celebrity to endorse both formats is key to finding a role for Wii and DS in the lives of the everybody – young or old – and the media we have selected for our campaigns is appropriate to this mission and strategy."
Rob Lowe, senior product manager, Nintendo UK

EVENT

GameCity strikes back

Nottingham's 'difficult second festival' pulls out the big guns for its head-to-head with London: Takahashi, Pajitnov and Vader





Walking past a biker scout or TIE pilot on guard and in full regalia is oddly disconcerting and oppressive. Or perhaps it's not so odd. Vader, on the other hand, was sweet, taking birthday tea, posing with children and sitting at the front for *Lego Star Wars*

October 24-28 saw the GameCity festival return to Nottingham for its second year, occupying the half-term slot. Perhaps seeing the wisdom of holding a gaming event when children are out of school and families are roving the streets, the London Games Festival opted to move to the same week this year. Thanks to BAFTA, Will Wright and geography, the capital dominated the headlines, but Nottingham once again offered a uniquely coherent, accessible and open-minded programme, and a genuine celebratory spirit.

"It's trying to establish gaming as not just something you buy in HMV, but something where you might be interested in the creation process"

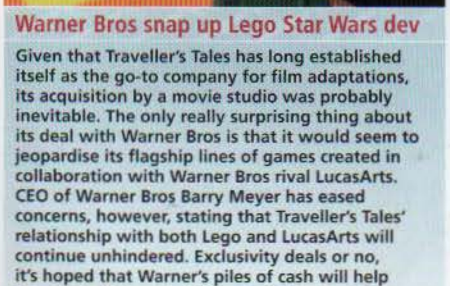
Through perseverance, and by offering an opportunity to discuss their games in a relaxed, cultural context, GameCity director **Iain Simons** succeeded in attracting several of the world's most renowned videogame auteurs to his relatively small event. *Katamari* creator Keita Takahashi outlined his philosophy and presented his next game, *Noby Noby Boy*, in typically idiosyncratic style (see p14). Alexey Pajitnov (see p68), author of *Tetris*, presided over an entire day of events on the Sunday with easy charm. And **David Braben** offered another glimpse of his ambitious *The Outsider* (see p32), and discussed next-gen game development with a packed audience of fans and students.

"I'm quite proud of the line-up we got," says Simons. "I like to think that the only way this festival can be noticed is by its line-up, by incongruously punching above its weight and getting the likes of Alexey, or Keita."

"It's an interesting idea," says Braben when asked what drew him to the festival. "It's trying to establish gaming as not just something you buy in HMV, but something where you might be interested in the creation process."

Heavyweight UK studios Bizarre, Rare and Free Radical also turned up to show their recent and future games to the public on the big screen at Nottingham's excellent Broadway cinema. GameCity regular Jonathan Smith, of Traveller's Tales, made an enchanting presentation of *Lego Star Wars: The Complete Saga* on the Star Wars-themed Friday to a rapt audience of young children, some of whom weren't shy about

Newswire



Warner Bros snap up Lego Star Wars dev

Given that Traveller's Tales has long established itself as the go-to company for film adaptations, its acquisition by a movie studio was probably inevitable. The only really surprising thing about its deal with Warner Bros is that it would seem to jeopardise its flagship lines of games created in collaboration with Warner Bros rival LucasArts. CEO of Warner Bros Barry Meyer has eased concerns, however, stating that Traveller's Tales' relationship with both Lego and LucasArts will continue unhindered. Exclusivity deals or no, it's hoped that Warner's piles of cash will help Traveller's Tales rebuild its reputation in movie tie-ins after the awful *Transformers: The Game*.





The recently redeveloped Broadway cinema played host to the majority of talks for the general public, and proved a perfect venue. Braben and Takahashi both came close to selling out its main theatre. Other venues included galleries and a tea shop











Artist John Burgerman (top left), a Nottingham Trent graduate, had work displayed with that of students and teachers (left), while Free Radical's David Doak (top right) was on hand to demo multiplayer *Haze*

correcting him on points of Star Wars lore (or even the design of his own game).

Such moments of genuine contact between gamers and creators weren't rare – Takahashi jumping, barefoot, off the stage to hand control of *Noby Noby Boy* to the audience was another encouraging example – and the games looked fantastic on the big screen. But effective as it is, publishers aren't yet used to this method of presentation, making substantial fresh material hard to come by. *The Outsider* and *Noby Noby Boy* were frustratingly immaterial, and Free Radical's exclusive demo of *Haze* multiplayer was the only other scoop.

Simons says that publishers, when he was attempting to secure playable code, would only deal in terms of amount of floorspace and number of demo pods, and weren't receptive to his explanations that GameCity doesn't work like that. There was a popular tent of pods on Nottingham's market square, but he is sceptical that this is the way forward for public presentation of games: "I think that's a real red herring, I really do. To be honest I'm tempted to have much less next year, because I don't think it's very helpful. Things in context that are thought about and presented properly are good. But a bunch of demo pods – you can do that anywhere, in HMV. Games just don't explain themselves very well." He feels that a giant screen in the square displaying playable *Wii Sports* worked better, and it's hard to disagree, although Nintendo's game is almost uniquely suitable to the task.

There are, of course, other strands to GameCity. Supported as it is by Nottingham Trent University, the festival offered opportunities for students to seek careers advice, including one-on-one portfolio sessions with Sony artists, and lectures on art and sound design. Sadly, these were largely under-attended. But GameCity also engaged two of the most important, and most criminally ignored, constituencies in gaming: children and parents.

Kids played with Lego bricks, experimented with simple game-making software and gawped and squealed at a tea party with Darth Vader and his platoon of stormtroopers, while their parents had a chance to air their concerns with Smith, and Jim Cliff from the BBFC. The latter also gave a fascinating and instructive talk on the BBFC's certification process; whether you agree or disagree with its decisions, it has to be a source of pride that the UK has a ratings body that is so open, understands games so well, and takes its responsibilities so seriously.

The independent game world was well represented, too; the Indiecade display of playable games and interactive art was a well-thought-out selection, and always busy with players. Unfortunately, a screening of a rough cut of Playing Columbine – Danny Ledonne's documentary about his controversial homebrew game, *Super Columbine Massacre RPG* – revealed it to be an indulgent and hectoring piece of work, stifling debate at what should have been the most challenging and thought-provoking session of the festival.

Nottingham's enthusiasm for hosting GameCity is what makes this unique event possible, and its compact city centre and fine venues are what make it what it is. It's a shame, then, that its population simply isn't big enough to bring it the media attention, status and audiences it deserves. Nonetheless, it's a relief to attend a celebration of videogames that's so free of awkwardness and hang-ups, so deserving of the term 'festival'.

"The thing I find most frustrating about most non-academic conferences is that they tend to start from a position of defence," concludes Simons. "If somebody attacks gaming we'll defend it, but our assumption is that any intelligent person will realise that in technical, aesthetic or cultural terms, this is interesting stuff. We're not apologists."



You might think that the festival was a little Star Wars-heavy, but there was more to it than hokey religions and ancient weapons. The king of space deserves a hokey religion of his own, of course

CULTURE

The play's the thing

Fun and games with Katamari Damacy's creator in Nottingham



Takahashi jokes that he's "bored," but admits "I don't like one-way expression – I joined Namco for a balance between what's required and what I want to do"



Keita Takahashi, creator of cult sensation *Katamari Damacy*, has announced that he is to make a playground for the people of Nottingham. The designer revealed his plans during his keynote presentation at Nottingham's GameCity festival (see p12), where he also discussed his favourite sandals, his philosophy of truck design, his obsession with Miffy, gardening as a form of revenge – and finally showed his next game, *Noby Noby Boy*, running for the first time.

The playground project began when GameCity director Iain Simons read in an interview that Takahashi dreamed of designing one. Having secured the leftfield artist/designer as a speaker (and having checked that he actually meant it), Simons wrote a proposal and began to drum up support with the city's council and two universities.

Discussions are still at an early stage, but the currently favoured site is an old playground in need of replacement in University Park, near the Lakeside Arts Centre. We visited it with Takahashi early on an overcast morning, the day before his talk. Despite the gloomy conditions, he seemed taken with the site, frequently wandering off in the middle of conversation to test the equipment and photograph the views. He imagines installing a wind turbine on the climbing net, and decorating it with hundreds of LEDs.

"I'm beginning to get a bit bored making just games. I wanted something in a different area, but quite similar. I thought this would be a good idea to start with"

"I want to make it happen," he announces later, after staring out of the window for some time. "But I don't really understand why everyone is trusting me so much!" he adds, with his trademark shy giggle.

There are numerous stumbling blocks for such a project, from local politics to geographical distance, but the park service seems extremely willing to accommodate his vision. And for his part Takahashi is keen to find another way to express himself. "Being totally honest with you, I'm beginning to get a bit bored making just games," he says. "I wanted something in a different area, but quite similar. Being able to move physically, to exercise, I thought that would be a good idea to start with." Asked what his feelings are about creating something physical and permanent rather than virtual, he answers ruefully, aware of the extreme freedom videogames offer him: "I'm looking forward to it. But I'm worried about the boundaries of what's possible."

The site, he says, is "a lot better than I expected. The surroundings were really nice. I hope this will take shape, and something will actually materialise."

Although his charmingly surreal visual designs certainly appeal to the curators of the Lakeside centre, it's his restless appetite for action and play that make the concept of a Takahashi-designed playground a truly enticing one. "At the moment, I just want to make a park where a child will feel like taking off his shoes and start to run," he says simply.

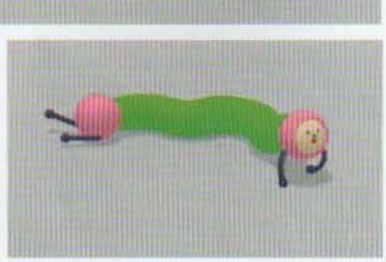
A bit of a stretch

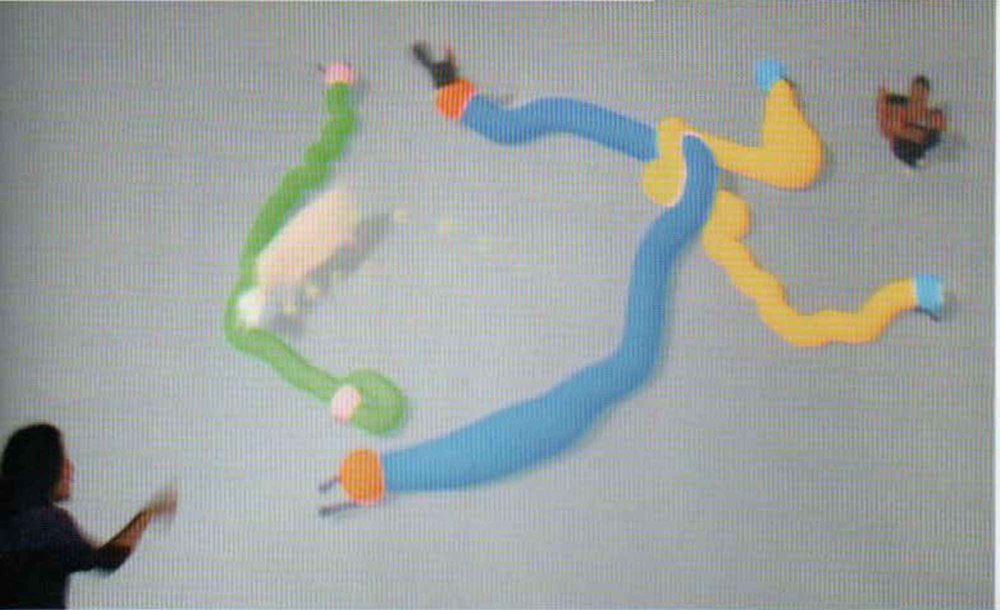
Ice skating and bungee jumping, together at last

The *Noby Noby Boy* demo Takahashi showed at GameCity had no audio or background graphics, just a few of the game's stretchy 'boys' running around a grey plane, cavorting with a crowd of animals. Each end of the boy is controlled with an analogue stick – pulling them in opposite directions causes the initially compact creature to spring out into a hilariously jittery snake. As with *Katamari*, the controls have a deliberate, sluggish inertia, making controlling a boy rather like controlling two ice skaters tied together by a bungee rope. They can jump absurdly high, cartwheeling through the air; they can also swallow animals and spit them out. But, at present, they don't seem to be able to actually get tied up in themselves or each other, which is both sensible but slightly disappointing. The interaction is as instantly appealing as *Katamari*. But once realised, that concept made itself; any great game design lurking inside *Noby Noby Boy* will certainly be much more difficult to bring out.





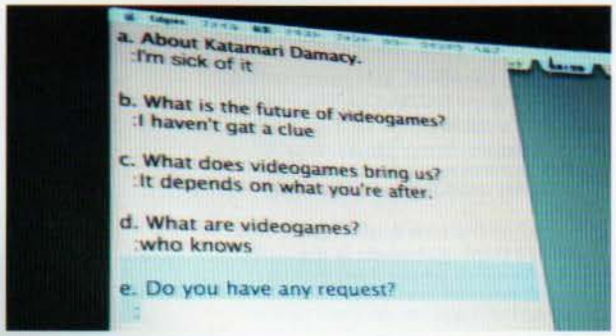


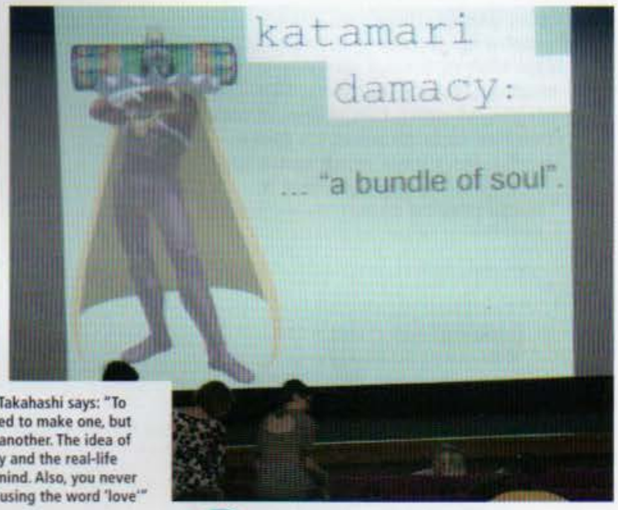






Takahashi feels trucks should be cute, and doodled over a photo to prove it. At his presentation (below) – he typed out his answers, but deleted the last question





On *We Love Katamari*, Takahashi says: "To begin with I only wanted to make one, but there was demand for another. The idea of mixing the surreal story and the real-life story popped into my mind. Also, you never really see a game title using the word 'love'"

Fittingly for a man who doodles incessantly while he talks, Takahashi's presentation is conducted live on his MacBook's desktop: he draws, manipulates tiny windows showing short slapstick videos, and toys with Google Earth. His unorthodox methodologies and unusual topics of discussion all make an acutely relevant point: everything is a game to this man. In a rather lengthy analogy, he compares his obsessive quest to obtain Miffy-branded paraphernalia via a sticker-collecting promotion to levelling up your character in an RPG.

"I feel that anything one does is enjoyable, has an aspect of play. But the way we live at the moment, play is actually a separate category in our lives which we need to materialise. My personal opinion is that every normal daily routine should be fun, but at the moment that doesn't seem to be the case. The idea I have is to break that dividing line, integrate both areas."

In the meantime, though, Takahashi's paymasters at Bandai Namco would like another slice of materialised play from him. Putting *Noby Noby Boy* into words eludes him. "I've been trying to explain it to my colleagues and managers in the office, but I haven't really succeeded," he confesses. So, at the end of his talk, he fires up a PS3 and plays it for and with the audience on the cinema screen, distributing controllers among the crowd.

It's a game that has barely taken shape yet, however. Takahashi admits that it should be finished already, and notes that as well as meaning 'stretch' and 'free', the word 'noby' can mean 'postpone'. What he shows is a simple but compelling control demo (see 'A bit of a stretch'), leading us to wonder if he's creating a game or a pure virtual toy.

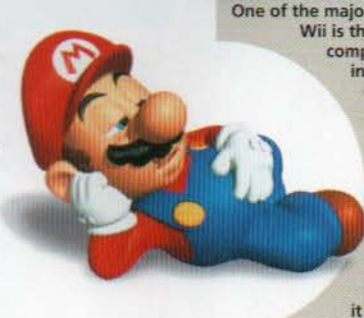
"My feeling is, there doesn't need to be any goal – it should be flexible, there should be freedom for every player to enjoy it for themselves," he says. "But I do understand the importance of setting objectives, since it will make it easier for the player to understand what to do. It's a difficult question. If you want to talk about *Noby Noby*, there is an overall objective, although I don't really understand the necessity."

Wondering why not everyone has such a playful spirit as he does, Takahashi is suddenly philosophical: "In life, people don't necessarily have objectives. Maybe it's easier for everyone to have a game which has one."

OUT THERE



A Wii TOKE



One of the major disappointments of Nintendo's Wii is that, for all its backwards compatibility, there's no way to plug in your old N64 pads for those 64bit classics. They were still cluttering up the cupboard of one enterprising fellow who recently combined one hobby with another and reworked a retired N64 controller as some strange kind of smoking device. At the time of going to press it remained unclear whether his reward was an increase in gaming skills or if it merely inspired him to nip to the garage for some Hob-Nobs.

SOUND BYTES

"Mario did excellent, just outstanding. Yeah, we were holding hands all the way and upside down and sideways. Super! Super duper Mario. Right?"
Could **Buzz Aldrin** have shared mushrooms with Mario on their zero-G flight to promote *Galaxy*?

"Which is the cow and which is the milk? I think Harmonix is the cow."
EA's milkmaid, vice president **David DeMartini**, explains to the Wall Street Journal why Harmonix, and not Red Octane, was such a great purchase

"I play games. Hands up. *Halo*'s good because it's shooting aliens... Those ultra-violent ones, I can play for an hour and then I feel dirty. *Vice City* – oh yes, all right, I've stolen 18 cars. I've had enough now! It's just as well I don't have much spare time or I would probably fritter it away playing computer games."
Actor **Daniel Craig** confesses to a gaming habit before being asked if he's embarrassed by it (the unfortunate response: "Completely")

"I've been very intrigued with *LittleBigPlanet*. I don't know that it belongs on [Sony's] platform."
Put away those claws, **Reggie Fils-Aime**

"Stephen Colbert had Will Wright on his show and he pummelled Nancy Pelosi's Mii in *Wii Boxing*. These decisive actions have earned our vote."
Gamecock CEO **Mark Wilson** explains why the publisher has backed American comedian Stephen Colbert for the US presidency

"Do you want to take on the boy's [sic] at their own game and beat them every single time? Tired of other gaming publications ignoring all your favourite games in favour of the latest big boy's toys?"
Play.com's 'review' of The Girl's Guide To Gaming, DS Edition, does all it can to remove the gender gap from gaming



INTERVIEW

Jingle all the way

Catching up with Bungie now that the fight's been finished

As a composer, **Marty O'Donnell** (with Michael Salvatori) is responsible for one of gaming's most memorable scores. As audio director at Bungie, he's seen the company bought by Microsoft then break away again. He took time out from a holiday after his 30th wedding anniversary to discuss *Halo*, independence, and what it's like to work at 'bloodthirsty' Bungie.

"Bungie's a strange place: there's a 'survival of the fittest' mentality. You don't necessarily get blessed with a role. Sometimes it's several people jockeying for a similar position"

Uncommonly for videogames, *Halo*'s score is a crucial part of the experience. How did that happen?

Coming from the jingle business, I know how powerful music can be in an iconic way. When I started in games I thought: 'Nobody's thought about the music that way: as a marketing tool as well as something that can enhance your gameplay experience'. When, in 1999, we launched *Halo* at MacWorld, I said: "Pay for the orchestra, let's do this right." I've controlled the music for all marketing from that point on, so I could make sure that those iconic musical statements show up.

You're audio director at Bungie, but you get involved in areas like scripting and story, too. Does Bungie encourage that kind of collaboration on a game?

I've always been upfront: I'm not just going to compose music. I'll work on story, with the actors, on the script, I'll be doing sound design and, while the game is coming together, I'll think about what the music is going to do, but I'm not going to actually put the music in until later. Bungie's a strange place: there's a 'survival of the fittest' mentality. You don't necessarily get blessed with a role. Sometimes it's several people who are jockeying for a similar position and have great ideas and you put them into a room and see who wins. It's a little bit bloodthirsty at times, and there is some shredding of souls that goes on. I'll stand back and wait to see who comes out of the door and say: "OK, you won, great. Let's work."

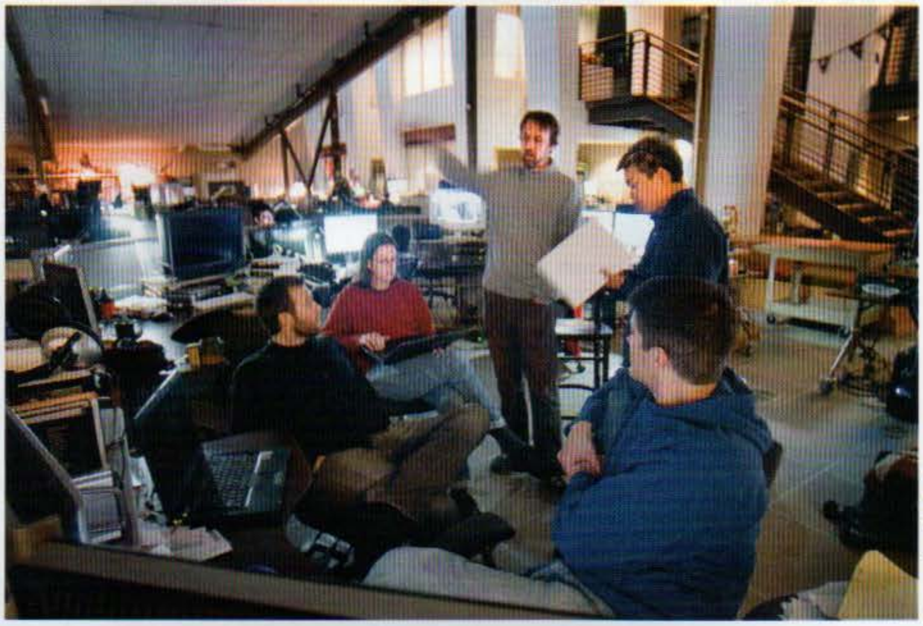
You joined Bungie full-time ten days before it was sold to Microsoft. Now that Bungie's independent again, do you see your life changing much?

Oh, yeah. Friends used to say: "You'll never work for a corporation." So when I ended up going to work for Bungie who were then bought by Microsoft, they said: "This won't last." It's never





Bungie has done more than most to turn the process of game development from misty art into a cold, hard science. While they argue against focus-testing concepts and ideas, each level goes through rigorous playtesting on its way to completion





Photography: Charles Peterson



Independence within Microsoft was as important to Bungie during the development of *Halo 2* and *3* as independence from Microsoft is now. A rarity among Microsoft employees, the developer was allowed to have its own, admittedly bunker-like, building off-campus with a large open-plan central studio area

been a goal to stay as an employee of a large corporation. And that's also the spirit of Bungie: we stayed separate from Microsoft. And I think Microsoft always treated us that way: they allowed us our own building, they never tried to interfere with us, for the most part, creatively, and the relationship worked fine. But it was inevitable that independence was such a strong part of the DNA of Bungie, it was something we all knew had to happen again. And I think Microsoft agreed.

Was Bungie feeling slightly stifled by being part of Microsoft?

I don't think we had gotten to the point where we were being stifled, but I think Microsoft agreed that they would get the best stuff to publish if they had this independent company that they had a good relationship with. This is the problem being wholly owned and being employees: the mechanisms for reward and for penalty are just not strong enough. We really just thought it's going to be healthier for us as a small company to be closer to success or failure.

How does it feel seeing other developers working on *Halo*?

On my level, if I write a piece of music, that's mine forever. If I sell it to this guy over here, now he owns it. But spiritually, creatively, it's my music. Bungie invented *Halo*, that's our baby. Microsoft owns the IP, and we at Bungie are completely aware that that's the reality of the situation.

It's possible that if it were completely under our control then we might be thinking about doing different things with the *Halo* universe than Microsoft is, but that's a choice we all made. So that's one of our motivations to say: "For the next IP we make, do we want somebody else to own it, or do we want to be the ones who control it?" We're Bungie, we're not *Halo*, but certainly *Halo* is our favourite child right now.

So what comes next?

We have incredibly talented people working on brand new games that I can't talk about. I can say this: we'll own the IP.

OUT THERE

May this card help console you during this difficult time. I am very sorry for your loss.

RED CARD



With the number of exceptional games around at the moment, it's hard to think of a time when getting the 360's red ring of death could be less convenient. So if you know of somebody that becomes so afflicted, how about sending a special kind of condolence card, one designed especially to communicate your deepest sympathies? With a tasteful 'red ring' made from red crystals, the card, made by Etsy.com member bsangel, contains a delicate message inside: 'May this card help console you during this difficult time. I am very sorry for your loss'. The card is currently sold out, but bsangel, who is a keen card maker and *Halo* player, says to message her to find out whether more will become available.

www.etsy.com/view_listing.php?listing_id=7341845



EVENT





Nintendo spells it out to 'solitary anti-social teens'

Japanese superpower clarifies its new audience focus, concentrating on life-enhancing diversions at the cost of traditional gaming

Much has already been said about Nintendo's efforts to attract a broader audience, but a London event at the end of October set out in very explicit terms the direction the company is pursuing – and it's one that quite determinedly moves away from its traditional fanbase.

Commandeering an 'energy clinic' in east London, Nintendo's Mind Body and Console press conference and showcase was a crisply manufactured event, intended to strike the right chord with a non-gaming audience – a strategy apparent from the prevalence of pinstriped analysts, investors and non-specialist press among the attendees. There seemed to be three principle pillars to this effort: to underscore Nintendo's profitability, to emphasise its software's inclusiveness, and to show that its games have moved beyond "the domain of the solitary anti-social teenager", as it was expressed by Nintendo's UK head of marketing, **Dawn Paine**.

Certainly, there's no arguing with Nintendo's successes, although it's difficult to credit the company with singlehandedly rescuing a flagging industry from the brink of extinction, as was UK general manager David Yarnton's implication. Certainly, the popularity of Wii and DS has been a massive contributing factor to the industry's recent growth, and Yarnton provided a barrage of statistics that corroborated this, saying that the success could be credited to the company's exploration of markets outside of the static demographic of teenage boys. A showreel of Nintendo's triumph made much of the 'grey gaming' phenomenon, and further figures were quoted, stating that two thirds of DS users today are female.

Such statistics were less interesting than Nintendo's professed outlook, however – which was surprisingly derogatory towards its traditional fans, albeit indirectly. Looking at the posters dotted around the event it was clear that the geeks were being intentionally sidelined in favour of supposedly candid shots that reaffirm Nintendo's popularity among ethnically diverse couples and

Nintendo suggested that it was courting a different audience, and the company would soon come to stand for 'self development, health, beauty and fitness'



Paine said the Touch! Generation titles aren't about "terabytes and HD" – instead they are concerned with improving people's lives through interactive experiences. Not much shooting, then

women sitting in kitchens. In fact, one slide during Paine's presentation outlined the ways in which gaming has been thus far been perceived as 'a sad addiction that removes the player from reality'. A picture of a long-haired nerd, screaming as he gripped a control pad, appeared on the projection screen, the surrounding space soon populated by the phrases 'glazed over', 'isolated' and other negative terminology. Rather than debunk such perceptions, however, Nintendo simply suggested that it was courting a different audience, and the company would soon come to stand for 'self development, health, beauty and fitness.'

This paradigm shift, to use Paine's term, would come as the result of Nintendo's Touch! Generation software which, unlike traditional gaming, doesn't "replace your real life – it connects with it." Paine's assertion that Nintendo wasn't neglecting the more committed gamer was supported by just three examples: *Metroid Prime 3*, *Zelda: Phantom Hourglass* and *Mario Galaxy*. Clearly there's nothing wrong with engaging a new audience – indeed, it's massively profitable – but at the same time such efforts seem to dismiss the worth of the medium prior to this influx of accessible, functional but artistically shallow titles.

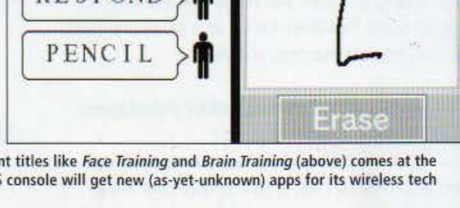


WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Japanmanship is subtitled 'life and videogame development in Japan', and that's an excellent summary of a site on which you'll find anything between Luis Vitton handbags and the habits of Japanese programmers. After a recent summer hiatus, JC Barnett (a nom de plume) has returned to posting regular updates – the first of which was an excellent summary of Microsoft's position in the Japanese market, while the second dealt with the handbags. The insights into a closed industry are valuable, all of the content is well written and often illuminating, and any site that advertises its shop with the line 'supplement my income by buying overpriced merchandise you don't really need' at least suggests an honest presence behind it.

Site:
Japanmanship
URL:
japanmanship.blogspot.com/





Nintendo's reiterated commitment to non-gamers with self-enrichment titles like *Face Training* and *Brain Training* (above) comes at the same time as company president Satoru Iwata announced that the DS console will get new (as-yet-unknown) apps for its wireless tech



Having created *Alien Vs Predator* for Atari's Jaguar in 1994 and on the PC in 1999, Rebellion is well versed in the series, though instead of an FPS, *AVP Requiem* is a thirdperson game







INTERVIEW

Rebel with a cause

Rebellion's Jason Kinglsey on Aliens Vs Predator, thriving as a privateer developer, and making a game in super-quick time

Rebellion's story isn't the same as other UK independents'. While even successful studios like Bizarre are choosing to shelter under a parent publisher's wing, Rebellion buys comics (it owns 2000AD) and beavers away as a multi-project game factory with a reputation for turning out slick titles in record time. The forthcoming *Aliens Vs Predator: Requiem* (see p44), made in just six months, brings the company's past as developer of the original *AVP* crashing into its present as the PSP movie licensee du jour. We took stock with CEO **Jason Kingsley** at Rebellion's Oxford HQ.

Rebellion seems to have become quite the PSP specialist. Was that by accident or design?
It's a bit of an irony, because it's never really been a focus. We did [Rebellion's first PSP project] *Dead To Rights: Reckoning* for Namco in a very short period of time – it was an emergency rescue job. We're very proud of what we achieved in the three-and-a-half months it took us to make the game.

"People have said middleware doesn't work on PS3, they're delaying their titles, and you think: 'It looks like people are struggling', but we don't have a problem at all"

Do these handheld projects with a quick turnaround help you to survive financially as an independent studio?
It has its advantages. One of the danger points for an independent is to have all your eggs in one basket and have one big title. We've made the transition to having around five titles in development at any one time, which is brilliant because it gives you the safeguard. We can comfortably handle four next-gen titles at the moment, which is pretty scary.

But it's still a tough environment for independents right now, yes?
From everything I hear, it's tough. For us, it's going great. It seems to be feast or famine. It's maybe the transition... We haven't had much problem with PS3 technology. Other people have said middleware doesn't work on PS3, they're delaying their titles, and you think: 'Wow, it looks like people are struggling', but we don't have a problem at all. But then we've planned for this transition and we're planning for the next one. We've created an engine, systems and tools that can cope with change. That's sometimes quite a hard thing to get through people's brains – you need to code defensively, so you don't have to throw it all away.

It must be odd to have *AVP* come home to roost after all these years.
We were very disappointed when Monolith got the gig to do *AVP2*, but we understood why, because we'd basically done four versions of the game, and you sometimes need a fresh perspective. But then this opportunity popped up and it was very exciting to revisit it with all those ideas that have bubbled round in the back of our minds. There's been a lot of approval processes – there's always a certain tension between what we'd like to do and what the licensor is allowing us to do. But we understand that, because it goes the other way around when we're doing things with Judge Dredd and Rogue Trooper.

Do you find that your ownership of 2000AD has given you more insight into how to approach other people's IP sensitively?
I think it has done. We have to deal with leftfield questions – for example: does Rogue Trooper have to be blue? That's like asking whether Sonic has to be blue. We've learned we don't need to ask those stupid questions.



The recently released *Star Wars Battlefront: Renegade Squadron* is another of Rebellion's PSP projects based on high-profile IP

Newswire



Sega launches Mega 3D

On October 30, Sega began to install the first of its new Mega 3D 360 theatre attractions in Japan. Consisting of a screen stretching 360 degrees around a central six-metre radius and a projector displaying high-definition 3D video, the experience is designed to be interactive, with the 20 to 25 'players' it holds at a time using 'air guns' to interact with the images. Purpose-designed glasses allow them to appreciate the 3D effect, which is a combination of prerendered backgrounds and realtime 3D elements. Audio is delivered in 6.1, and the entire attraction is controlled by PC for ease of maintenance. No news yet of a Euro appearance.









Apple prepares assault

Gadget and sometime computer manufacturer moves to bite into the portable gaming market; Harmonix prepares first course

Apple has announced that it will be opening its iPhone and iPod Touch to third parties through a developer SDK early next year. It may have been a part of Apple's strategy for some time, but it's also the culmination of months of hackers hacking and Apple responding, and the company will look to retain some control over content, most likely through a similar system to Nokia's digital signatures (essentially an approval process, which in the past has been praised by Apple CEO **Steve Jobs**). Upon announcing the new software, Jobs said: "We want native thirdparty applications on the iPhone, and we plan to have an SDK in developers' hands in February."

What the iPhone hardware will be capable of when compared to other handhelds is yet to be tested, but a must-have consumer device with a touchscreen, camera and wifi is surely too good an opportunity for developers to miss out on.

Certainly, the viability of the iPod platform beyond the likes of *Brick* (an Easter egg created by Steve Wozniak for the very first version of the machine) has been proven by the release in the last few weeks of *Phase* (above), developed by Harmonix. Downloadable from iTunes, *Phase* is a bright rhythm-action game that syncs with any music you choose, and is controlled by using three circles of the iPod click wheel in a similar fashion to *Guitar Hero* (because of this interface, it's obviously not compatible with iPhone or iPod Touch). It's difficult to see *Phase* becoming anything other than a significant hit, and Apple's movement into portable multimedia with a very desirable device may make for a highly profitable marriage with game developers.



The iPhone specs are in certain respects superior to those of even PSP

Continue

Great Achievements
Go on a gnome quest or at 88mph in a DeLorean

Portal love
Clever games generate clever fan creativity

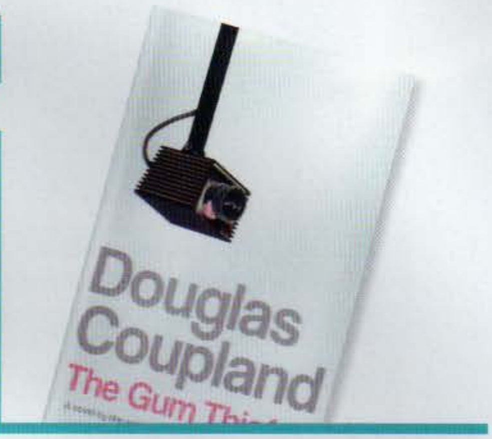
DualShock 3
Come on back, rumble, and give us a little hug

Quit

The 24-hour day
All tips for more gaming time gratefully received

Busted fanboys
Neo-Geo anniversary celebrations turn sour

Broken matchmaking
***Team Fortress 2* really deserves so much better**



Author: Douglas Coupland
Publisher: Bloomsbury
ISBN: 978 1 59691 106 2

THE GUM THIEF

Coupland returns to the problems of our everyday slipping-down lives in this epistolary novel

It's appropriate, considering his fascination with the way life flows within our consumer society, that Douglas Coupland has quietly become so prolific. It's 16 years since Generation X: Tales For An Accelerated Culture archly defined the way cultural and commercial globalisation was and would continue to affect the adulthood of the Baby Boomers' kids, and Coupland has continued to work regularly, releasing a stream of quasi-comic yet ultimately meaningful books about the travails of family, work and post-modern aspirations. But if last year's JPod (E165) was overly showy, The Gum Thief (his 11th English-language novel) is a return to the process of finding some remnants of redemption for cracked lives.

Divorced, living in a basement flat and swigging cheap vodka, Roger is trying to make sense of it all. The death of his son. The fact he didn't invest in Microsoft shares. That his wife survived cancer and left him. Bethany is his flipside. Young, plump, a goth, she's living at home with no plans for the future. Yet despite being literary ciphers, Coupland weaves a compelling web around the pair as they communicate through a series of letters which are also interlinked with chapters from Roger's once unfinished, now restarted novel. Explained this way, it seems an incredibly formulaic approach – but as with Coupland's best work, it's the well-observed aphorisms combined with the underlining sympathy for the characters that ultimately wins through.



Author: Don Tapscott and Anthony D Williams
Publisher: Atlantic
ISBN: 978 1 84354 636 8

WIKINOMICS

How sharing and openness will change the way we work and play

By now we all should be aware that Web 2.0, mass collaboration, user-generated content or whatever other terms you wish to use have the potential to change life, the universe and everything. In Wikinomics, which has finally been published in a UK edition, consultants Don Tapscott and Anthony D Williams try to dig down into the hype. In particular, they're keen to look beyond the hours wasted on Facebook and see how mass collaboration – which they define as a combination of openness, peering, sharing and acting globally – can affect business. Well-known examples include how failing Canadian gold concern Goldcorp created the world's largest mine by releasing its geological data online.

Getting retired chemists, engineers and inventors to work on some of industry's problems has also proved to be a lucrative experiment, and the success of open-source software is obvious. Perhaps more interesting is the balance between companies releasing information to improve efficiency and keeping their special sauce in-house. It's a tricky subject, and one that's less open to the sort of analysis that produced Wikinomics. Sadly, *Second Life* aside, there's little mention of games, either. It's a shame as the videogame industry continues to operate on an extremely proprietary model, making it vulnerable to change. At least there should be potential to shake things up with the likes of Home, XNA and Xbox Live Arcade, not to mention the casual PC space.

INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

Dark Void

FORMAT: TBA **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM



From *Crimson Skies* developer Airtight, anything but a vacuous follow-up. Jetpacks, planes and prop-driven flying saucers join the high-flying melee combat – quite a burden by any standard

Twelve Sky

FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** GIGASSOFT



All aboard for this month's open beta, 'all' being anyone up for the 'endless massive battle' of Korea's chart-topping MMO. Now three years old, the game is making its English-speaking debut

Nights Into Dreams

FORMAT: Wii **PUBLISHER:** SEGA



Newly announced My Dreams mode brings Nightopia's beasties together in a custom sandbox linked to the Weather Channel. Let's hope the wildlife here isn't quite the same as that of *Stalker*

Iron Man

FORMAT: 360, DS, PC, PSP, PS2, PS3, Wii **PUBLISHER:** SEGA



Sega flexes its muscle with an all-format movie adaptation. The multi-year deal with Marvel allows for comic- and movie-based sequels, much like those of Activision's recent *Spider-Man* series

Turok

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** TOUCHSTONE



A late announcement for a late PC port. Disney's dino-courting FPS will grace mice and keyboards in spring 2008, following the console release in February. Aspyr is handling the conversion

Overlord

FORMAT: 360, PC **PUBLISHER:** CODEMASTERS



Some more loot for the castle, courtesy of three downloadable (dis)content packs. *Raising Hell* adds new story missions, the others multiplayer maps and local splitscreen functionality

New LucasArts/BioWare Project

FORMAT: TBA **PUBLISHER:** LUCASARTS



Is it the Star Wars TV series? An Indiana Jones spin-off? Howard The Duck? After the mild disappointment of this month's *Mass Effect*, a return to a galaxy far, far away could prove worthwhile

Gran Turismo 5

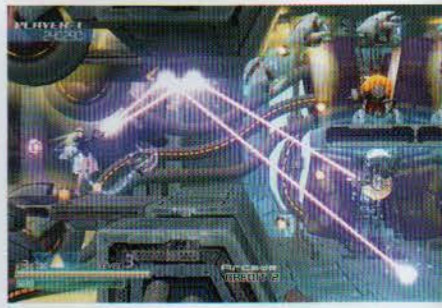
FORMAT: PS3 **PUBLISHER:** SCEE



Who's the Stig? You are, it seems. A deal with BBC Worldwide will bring 40 episodes of Top Gear to GT TV, the PS3-based broadcast channel. The show's Test Track, meanwhile, joins the game's roster

Omega Five

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** HUDSON SOFT



Hudson's rather fetching shooter hits XBLA this month, adding yet another 360-degree control scheme to the library. The human cast sets this one apart, along with *R-Type*-esque environments

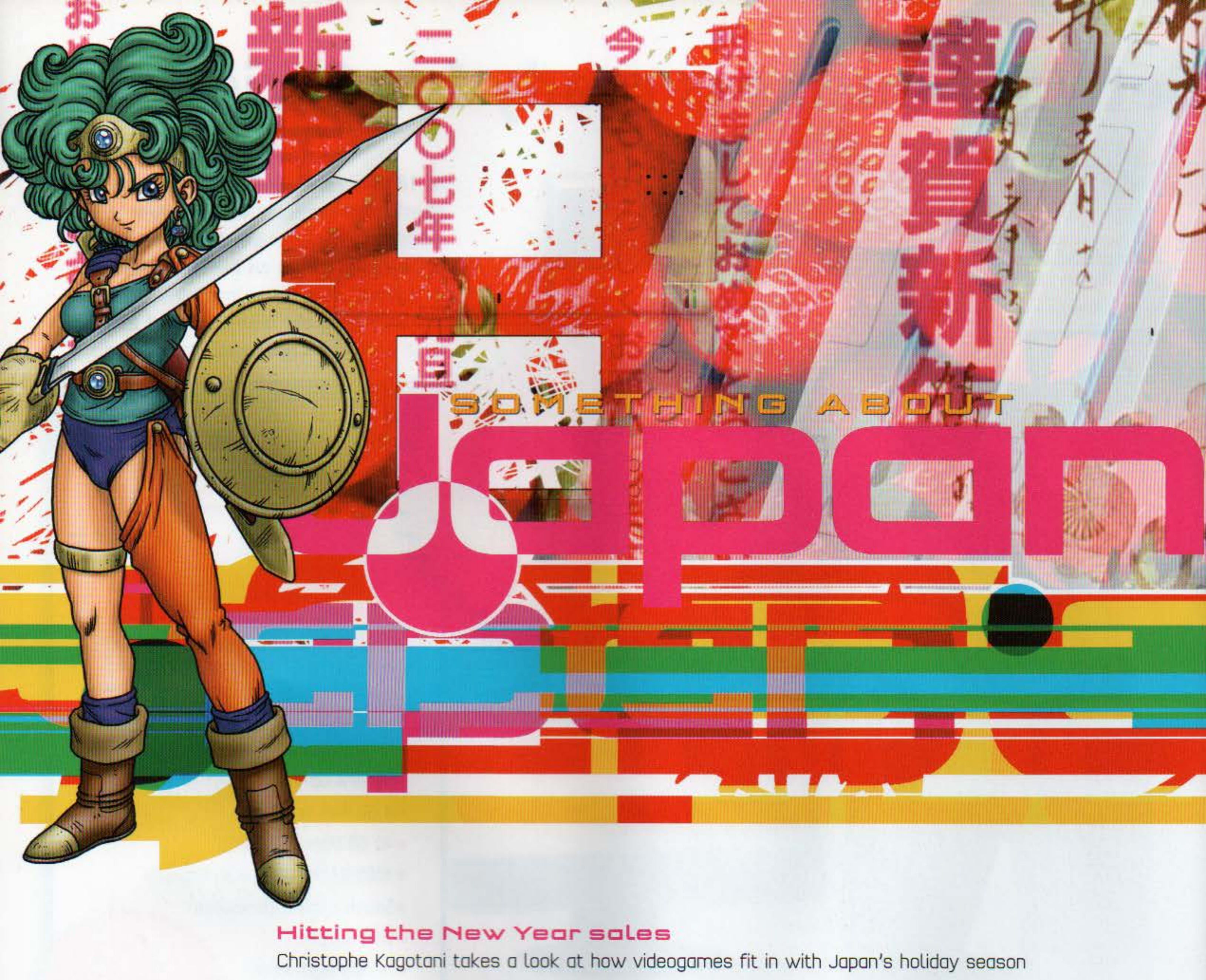


INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Colordefense

www.kongregate.com/games/Coolio_Niato/colordefense

Another month, another flurry of *Robotron* clones. You'd think that we'd have seen nearly every possible variation upon this concept by now but, amazingly, there are some stalwarts out there still squeezing the last drops of ingenuity from the genre. *Colordefense* creator 'Coolio Niato' has innovated previously in this space with *Colorwars* – a game in which you had to change the colour of ship before you could destroy the similarly colour-coded enemies swarming upon you. *Colordefense* takes a passive approach to the same situation: instead of firing at enemies, you have to deflect them with one of the three colour panels that surround your ship, rotating the shield to match the colour of the incoming foe. Each time an enemy hits, your ship is punted across the screen, resulting in a frantic scrabble to stay in the middle where you have more time to react to in-bound enemies. With a few variations of enemies and increasingly faster waves, the game proves a challenge, albeit a short-lived one – but its real triumph is simply that it refreshes a stale concept.



Hitting the New Year sales

Christophe Kagotani takes a look at how videogames fit in with Japan's holiday season



The big day of the year in Japan is, of course, New Year's Day. The extended family gathers, drinks, eats, drinks, talks and... ah, yes, drinks again. For kids there's a magic moment, called the Otoshidama time, when the adults give them delicately crafted envelopes, known as pochibukuro, with money inside (perhaps ¥1,000-3,000).

While the adults are engrossed in their chat, the kids quietly open their envelopes, enviously eyeing each other in some absurd parody of a spaghetti western, young Clint Eastwoods furrowing their brows while Enio Morricone's music plays. How much did I get this year? Did he receive more than me? Did he – ha! – get less? The adults like to think that some of the cash will be saved but the kids have no such intentions: after all, it comes but once a year.

Out there on the high street, it is also the busiest day of the year, with Japan running at full speed. For a store, not opening on New Year's Day would be choosing bankruptcy. Parents and grandparents accompany the kids to the biggest stores, where there are so many people that it's rush hour all day. People queue for hours before the stores open. Naturally, the toy and game industries concentrate their marketing on the few months before, and the consoles now have problems competing for customers with other devices: to pick just one example, new mobile phones from the three major operators (Docomo, AU and Softbank) were revealed in Japan in October and November this year, aimed at that magic moment when prices are slashed and people forget about their budgets and their diets. It's also a factor in the huge fukubukuro ('wagon sales') where huge amounts of products are dumped to clear shelves.

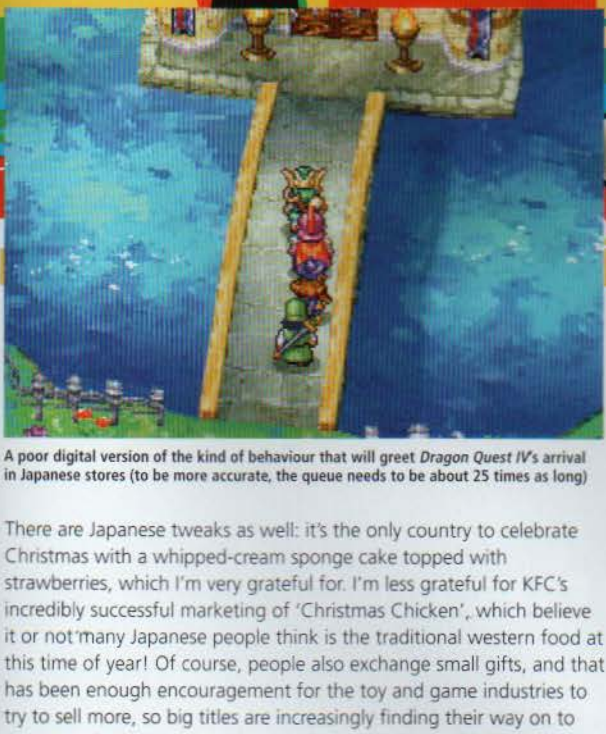
The toy and game industries concentrate their marketing on the few months before New Year's Day, and the consoles now have problems competing for customers with other devices, such as new mobile phones

The fukubukuro are very popular. Essentially, there are bags you can't look inside, but you know they are filled with items of a given type (the label will say 'fashion' or 'electronics', for example). Each bag carries a standard price (¥5,000 (£21), ¥10,000 (£42) and upwards), and the content will be worth at least that much, more often quite a bit more.

I don't mean to give the impression that New Year's Day is purely a high-tech thing, though: temples and shrines get in on the act, as people come looking for good omens for the coming year. Monks sell tons of lucky charms (for driving, study, health – anything you want, really). They make their living for the year during that single day, from the billions of yen donated to spirits.

So, what does this have to do with games? At some stage, another tradition has been added to the above: Christmas. It's considered to be as important as a Matsuri (a local festival) in the calendar, even though it's not even a public holiday.





A poor digital version of the kind of behaviour that will greet *Dragon Quest IV*'s arrival in Japanese stores (to be more accurate, the queue needs to be about 25 times as long)

There are Japanese tweaks as well: it's the only country to celebrate Christmas with a whipped-cream sponge cake topped with strawberries, which I'm very grateful for. I'm less grateful for KFC's incredibly successful marketing of 'Christmas Chicken', which believe it or not many Japanese people think is the traditional western food at this time of year! Of course, people also exchange small gifts, and that has been enough encouragement for the toy and game industries to try to sell more, so big titles are increasingly finding their way on to Japanese shelves in December in preparation for Christmas.

Of course, nowadays the grandparents and mothers are also queuing for their own DS, and it's going to be another big holiday season for Nintendo. But amid all the new titles, it's funny to know almost certainly that the winner, in terms of sales, by January 2, 2008 will be a game that's 17 years old: Square Enix's *Dragon Quest IV* for the DS. As the money is handed over, few people will think about the irony of facing the future by buying a piece of the past, but perhaps there's something appropriate there as well. After all, New Year's Day in Japan is all about family, memories and personal lives – and not really about the big game companies falling over themselves to grab the cash. In that context, there's something comforting about *DQIV*'s inevitable success: it's a little time capsule, a piece of nostalgia freshly wrapped. Isn't that all anyone wants for the holidays?



Dragon Quest IV is one of Square Enix's many re-releases, and the DS version is in fact a port of a PlayStation remake from 2001 – which won't prevent it selling like juicy strawberry cakes

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Rock Band



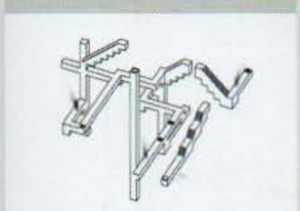
So, our fears are confirmed – solo action in *Guitar Hero III* – the devil, go-go dancers and all – just can't cut it against the chance to play with the whole damn band.
360, PS2, PS3, EA

God Of War: Chains Of Olympus



Having seen last month that Kratos' bombastic fury will translate from the big screen to the small one rather well, the wait has become a lot less traumatic.
PSP, SCEE

Echochrome



Post *Portal*, it's good to know there's more spatial riddling around the corner. Well, sort of, if you line up that column over that gap just right. No cake in this one, though.
PS3, PSP, SCEE

Win button

Do simple controls really equal accessibility?



Fable 2's combat system uses three face buttons – one for melee attacks, one for ranged and one for magic. It will hinge on how intuitively its context-sensitive actions, such as picking up objects and interacting with scenery, behave

Since Nintendo launched its Wii, the feeling that game controls have become too complex has only grown. Though the console is just the latest example of an interface philosophy that included the GameCube's large 'A' button, it seems that it's only now that others have seriously started to explore new control methods, questioning the intricate combos and button sequences that have been so intrinsic to gaming.

Too Human is one of them. It has a control scheme that has its main character striking whatever's in range in the direction you point the 360's right stick. Though this might sound simplistic, a set of ranged combat options add a little more depth, as do dodges, jumps and juggles. The idea is to stop flowing combat being the preserve of only the most skilled players.

Similarly, Lionhead's aims for *Fable 2*'s fabled one-button melee attack control scheme is that it's 'so simple that anyone can play it'. Responding to holds, releases and taps, the system is context sensitive, allowing items to be picked up and enemies to be dashed against walls.

It's not hard to imagine the challenges that the designers of such schemes faced: they must always do what the player expects them to in any situation, but more importantly they have to be both accessible to new players and rewarding to experienced ones. This is where the cracks usually show. Players become frustrated that they can't do exactly what they want and tire of what often boils down to repetitive combat.

Games with demanding controls, like *Ninja Gaiden*, are often used by those who call for simpler schemes as an example of being too hard. But though their aims might seem laudable, perhaps we shouldn't forget that few gaming experiences match that of truly mastering Ryu. After all, games shouldn't simply be smooth experiences that hold a player's hand – they're interactive; their players need to feel as if they had a part in their success.

And could the one-button ideal be a misreading of what accessibility really means? Should it not be about flexibility – widening options instead of constraining them? Instead of offering one easy way to interact, how about allowing players to shape their own way in a game according to their aptitudes?

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **SILICON KNIGHTS**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **Q1 2008**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E164**



Too Human

Silicon Knights' console answer to Diablo finally shows it's a man

After a famously disastrous showing at E3 in 2006 and the extensive fallout from founder Denis Dyack's unfavourable reaction to the media coverage, Silicon Knights hasn't been particularly eager to show off the progress it has been making on *Too Human*. The developer recently chose to show the first new playable code to journalists in the controlled environment of its offices in St Catharines, Canada, and though not without its flaws, the project appears to be finally shaping up into something that could match the initial hype.

Set in a future full of the echoes of Norse mythology, *Too Human* tells the story of a war between humans and machines in a fashion strongly reminiscent of Silicon Knights' cult hit *Eternal Darkness*, with playable flashbacks expanding the plot. Incidental cutscenes are similarly interactive, with the player only losing control of main character Baldur in plot-critical dialogue or action scenes – such as the opening cutscene which, in a nod to epic poem Beowulf, features Baldur defending a seedy (but lively) outpost bar from a ravenous and seemingly unstoppable mechanical foe.

Designed as an action-RPG, *Too Human* offers players a choice of five character classes for Baldur. Clearly influenced by MMORPGs, they range from the damage-soaking Tank to the healing Bio Mechanic,





Set in a future full of the echoes of Norse mythology, Too Human tells the story of a war between humans and machines in a fashion reminiscent of Eternal Darkness







with Dyack hinting that *Too Human*'s DLC could include new classes.

Each class can grow to level 50, each with unique skill trees and the choice to stay human or progressively augment themselves with cybernetic implants (intended to have major ramifications in the over-arching plot), with powers including group buffs or the ability to aggro enemies.

Silicon Knights has promised a near-infinite amount of customisation for characters, with hundreds of different weapon and armour sets ranging in rarity from common all the way up to *World Of WarCraft*-style epic loot sets. Weapons and armour can be further customised by engraving runes or performing 'charm quests' (Achievement-like tasks such as killing a set number of enemies) to endow them with unique powers

Despite the obviously online-oriented nature of the classes, Silicon Knights chose not to show any co-op multiplayer, refusing to confirm the possible number of simultaneous players, or even to discuss the perplexing possibility that all co-operative players could be playing as Baldur.

Accepting that the player chooses a character suited for 'soloing' (such as the all-rounder the Champion or ranged weapon expert the Commando), the singleplayer



Building up the combo meter is for more than show – large combos allow the player to store up energy to perform battle cries (time-limited buffs and debuffs) and 'ruiners' – the Norse equivalent of a smart bomb







Projectile weapons work similarly to those of *Halo* – explosives on the left trigger and bullets on the right, and one per hand if dual wielding – and come in slug, plasma and laser varieties





Intentionally cinematic, the player cannot take manual control of the camera, but can set the view distance. As a result, there are moments you'll find yourself fighting (or being attacked by) a foe you cannot see

combat is as obsessively compulsive as the *Diablo* titles which obviously inspire it. Whereas Blizzard took the concept of point and click with a mouse and used it to simplify and streamline *Diablo*'s realtime battles, Silicon Knights has taken this paradigm and made it fit the joypad.

During battles, the player simply points the right stick in the direction of the foe they'd like to attack, locking on to enemies and allowing Baldur to dash forward and attack with his melee weapon as soon as they're in range. Simply shifting direction on the stick will change targets and (hopefully) build up a continuous kill combo.

Although this initially seems simplistic and unsatisfying, the inclusion of projectile weapons (such as dual-wield pistols and grenade-launching rifles) on the triggers that similarly target enemies using the right stick adds a tactical depth, as does the pressure of the enemy swarms and mini-bosses that require skill to target the correct area for attack. *Too Human* has notably not turned button-mashing into stick-waggling, despite a design decision fraught with that danger.

Enjoyable in its current form, our reservations remain about the online co-op. With no *Diablo*-esque level randomiser on show and a static plot, the amount of customisation options may go to waste if there's simply no impetus to replay the title. All signs point to the game being well worth one playthrough, at least.





Designed for raw damage dealing (the game includes a damage-per-second stat), the Berzerker is the only character who can dual-wield melee weapons



Cyberspace is the place

Too Human's world includes a cyberspace, accessed by interacting with wells. It's the home of the Norns, the female fates of Norse mythology, and allows Baldur to find secret items, open doors and otherwise affect the 'real' world. Our limited time with the game meant we couldn't tell if it was any more than simply another take on the *Zelda* series' parallel worlds, and the frequent trips into wells just to open locked doors seemed like a bit of a wasted opportunity.







The Outsider's animation is a blend of motion-capture with AI-driven techniques. In a fist-fight, the characters' reactions to obstacles as well as blows is very realistic

The Outsider

David Braben offers another early glimpse of his freeform conspiracy theory working in practice



FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **TBA**
DEVELOPER: **FRONTIER**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **TBA (2009)**

Watching the detectives

Details of *The Outsider*'s plot – the word may be even more appropriate for its non-linear map of factions and motivations – are still firmly under wraps. But we can begin to piece together a picture from the hypothetical situations Braben describes. Agents of the story will probably include a corrupt CIA, a terrorist group Jameson was undercover with, the Chinese secret service, the conspirators behind the assassination, and perhaps most interestingly, the media. Appropriately enough for a Hitchcockian thriller, there will also be at least one MacGuffin. Braben's examples of how you might use it – to play factions against off each other, or even release it to the media – could well be the best distillation of *The Outsider*'s remarkable freedom of action.

David Braben still isn't ready to show much of *The Outsider*. The free-roaming political thriller, revealed over a year ago in **E**165, is some two years from being ready, and currently unsigned (although that could change sooner rather than later: when asked about its status, Braben says his "no comment" with a broad smile). But the father of *Elite* is enthusiastic enough about his vision to evangelise it to the general public at GameCity, show some very early demos of the game running, and discuss it with us afterwards.

It's still one of the most fascinating and ambitious concepts in development. The player is John Jameson, a CIA agent accused of killing the US president, and pursued by the media and security forces. The story of Jameson's fight to stay alive and unravel the conspiracy will be entirely non-linear. Players will not just be free to explore Washington DC and adopt the tactics of their choosing, but also to influence events and manipulate or ally themselves with several factions.

"It's not that it branches once or twice, it has the potential to branch continuously," Braben explains. "All the avenues that are normally closed off aren't closed off, such as where you can't just kill a character."



Frontier has accepted that there will be one course of action the majority of players will take: "We have to ensure the path most people are likely to do works well"

Constructing a freeform narrative universe sounds daunting, but he says it's more so practically than conceptually: "The difficulty in balancing that for the player is the hard part, not the flexibility in the story."

It's hard to imagine how this will take tangible shape, especially in a game which Braben insists is still, fundamentally, in the action genre. But one of the demos at his talk brings *The Outsider* into sharp focus for the first time. Jameson is interrupted in a burglary by a cop, who attempts to arrest him but is in turn interrupted by a gang of shadowy shooters. He panics, but Jameson persuades him to take his side in the firefight through quickfire conversational gambits, chosen in realtime while fighting, from two options that are summarised in a word or two and chosen by the game on the fly.

Despite the work-in-progress graphics and dialogue, the scene flows naturally and is electric with potential. *The Outsider*'s conversations seem positioned somewhere between adventure-game dialogue trees and context-sensitive squad commands. "The two aren't that far apart from each other, really, and that's the point," says Braben. "But it's when you're shouting story-related things to each other in battle that it gets very interesting. Like 'Stop shooting and I'll give you the thing' or 'We can work together'."

The most thrilling concrete prospect in *The Outsider* is that it will not only let you choose to talk or shoot, but do both at once, and work is clearly well advanced on making that a reality. Two years is ample time to work through this vastly ambitious brief; we only hope that Frontier can keep up with developments in other fields, and make *The Outsider* as polished and complete as it is far-sighted.





Braben says that the key to creating a believable city was to stop using art packages. Frontier has built its own tool, allowing buildings to be pieced together









The Club

If you like a lot of points for your headshot, join our club

One of the problems with arcade-style games is that, on paper, they never amount to much. Take *OutRun* and *Gran Turismo*, for example: how can a handful of Ferraris and one forked racetrack compare to garages full of vehicles and a multitude of courses and parts? Likewise, *The Club* is a self-consciously arcade-style interpretation of the genre. So, on paper, it hardly compares to the Hollywood narratives and emergent AI to be found in the likes of *Halo 3* or *Half-Life 2*.



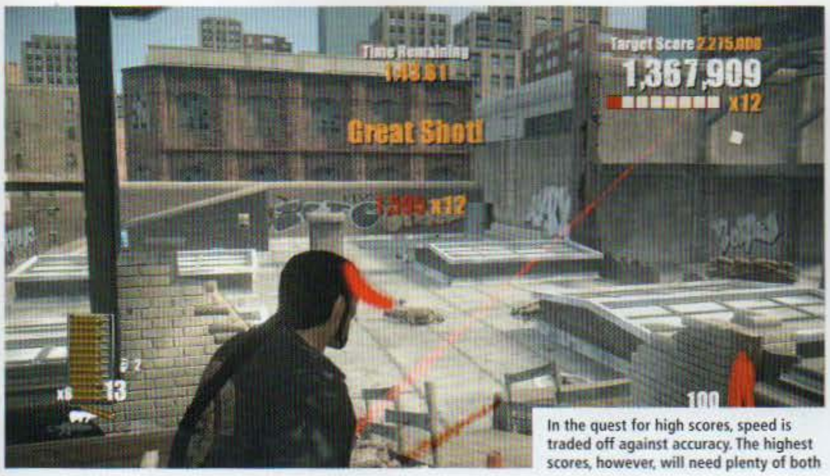
Each of the game's eight different characters has a very distinct feel. Kuro's low-resilience/high-speed combination, for example, will require a very different approach to that required by Renwick's all-round balance

Instead, you simply pick one of eight characters and play through brief-burst levels that take place across eight different environments. That's what the brave new world for console shooters amounts to, according to Bizarre Creations: running round and playing the same level again and again. It hardly sounds like much of a new dawn. And that's the problem with arcade-style games. Because to understand the beauty of *The Club*, you have to play it. You have to play it the way Bizarre intended: you have to pick up a controller and compete for high scores and glory. That's why Sega invited journalists from across Europe to a high-score play-off at a recent press event.

The theory is simple: hit targets to trigger a points multiplier; then keep hitting targets to sustain that multiplier in order to rack up a mammoth score. In practice it's simply a lot of fun. Playing through a level set in a stately manor house, there's a brief moment of trepidation before everything kicks off and instinct – and adrenaline – takes over. And then, having cleared the main hallway, turned right through the drawing rooms and descended into the wine cellar, or even before then, the score multiplier will start ticking down and panic sets in. And you'll forget to use the sprint button, or something else will go wrong, but it can be put right with just one more restart – one more go.

Part of the pleasure is sitting back after a bout, hands taut with exhilaration, marvelling at the inhumanly high scores that some other players are capable of, before trying to match them. Consequently, the game's leaderboards will be crucial to its success, which is why Bizarre is talking of having up to 600 different boards. Other modes include, among others, Siege, in which modern-day gladiators defend a particular piece of ground from relentless waves of attackers, and Survivor, in which the regular game is given the added urgency of a bomb strapped to the player character.

One mode that won't be included, however, is an online spectator mode. Which is a real shame, because *The Club* is almost as much fun to watch as it is to play, spotting all the little things that other players do differently, and incorporating those tactics into your own game. Because, ultimately, the fun doesn't end until you're top of the leaderboard.



In the quest for high scores, speed is traded off against accuracy. The highest scores, however, will need plenty of both

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **BIZARRE CREATIONS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **2008**





Twentieth century boy

'The house was developed into the present mansion by Frederick, Fourth Baron Calthorpe' runs the blurb left in the bedrooms at The Elvetham, Sega's chosen venue to show off *The Club*. 'The house was said to have become the playground of a shadowy organisation of aristocrats' it continues. 'This group of wealthy, yet brutal, men were known to pay mercenaries to fight to the death in an earthen pit, which now forms the internal courtyard'. It's at this point that it becomes obvious the promotional leaflets were produced in cahoots with Sega.

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY 2008**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E169, E177, E182**

Devil May Cry 4

Dante and Nero decide it's better to reign in hell than serve in heaven











The difficulty from *DMC3* has been toned down somewhat in the initial stages, but by the time of the denouement *DMC4*'s challenge is promised to exceed even that of its predecessor



The role of the knights in *DMC4* is ambiguous, but it's at least clear that some of them will get on your wrong side. Well, it makes a nice change from the same old demonic marionettes

An extended hands-on with *DMC4* reveals that while it may be supremely silly, and still in some ways limited by its past, it is also a slick and professionally made title fully conscious of the strength of excess. The sword and gunplay basis of the original has been recreated and enhanced with such irreverence that *DMC4*, for all of its predictability, does possess that valuable quality of self-knowledge that may add just enough spice to the mix.

The first level throws Nero into a fight with Dante in a church – the two beginning the game as enemies – and after this the levels are built around slicing up scores of demons before reaching big set-pieces – which seem to get more histrionic by succession. Large outdoor environments are promised to be a new thing for the series, with particular notice given to a port town, a wide landscape of blasted snow, a jungle location, and several enormous castles.

But the real interest lies in the weapons, which are an unadulterated pleasure. Let's start small: the sword can be revved like a motorbike to make everything a little more sensational and inflict more damage; Nero can also activate his 'Devil Trigger' for extra attacks, which causes a ghostly blue demon to appear and mirror his actions. Dante becomes playable after a certain point in the game and has his four styles present and correct, but the real interest is in his outstanding special weapons: Gilgamesh is a melee weapon which puts spinning blades on his feet and hands, and allows vicious pummelling attacks (including a shoryuken). Lucifer causes Dante to sprout grey skeletal wings and shoot out red 'demon blades' that hover in the air and can be controlled and used to surround him – or made to explode by dropping a rose. But the best, by far, is Pandora's Box. This is a small briefcase with at least five different uses: it can be thrown like a boomerang into enemies, while opening it stuns anyone nearby, and it can even transform into a machine gun or a huge rocket launcher with several different additional forms, including a laser. Then there's the last function, which sees it convert into a mobile missile battery surrounded with cannons (featuring a seat for Dante in the middle), which can float around raining nastiness on to anything that even looks at it the wrong way.

DMC4 is not going to reinvent the wheel, but it'll keep it rolling. It's breathtakingly beautiful in places, has the same ferocious combat as ever, and offers more extras than the previous games (which were stuffed). It all adds up to something of a significant release for the traditionally fallow post-Christmas period.

Order of demons

***DMC4*'s glorious excess looks to be maintained throughout the story, which centres on an order of knights – of which Nero is a member – who fight demons and are led by Krato, the brother of resident damsel-in-distress Kyrie. The order includes other characters you'll meet along the way, including the predictable sexpot in Gloria (who has the honour of inspiring what must be the most ridiculous camera flyby shot in videogame history), while Lady and Trish will return – though no Virgil this time. The story seems to begin with Dante attacking and killing members of the order, and Nero gaining the power of the Devil Bringer, hence their first confrontation.**



Nero gives Dante a decent run in the style stakes, but his real gift to the *DMC* armoury is a long grab via his devil hand – which maintains combos as well as merrily tossing foes around



Nathan Spencer isn't the only person out there with some significant metal assistance: the plot features his former comrades, who have been bionically altered in various ways and now, of course, work for the bad guys



Bionic Commando

After too long, one of the original bionically enhanced warriors is back

B*ionic Commando* begins in the clouds above Ascension City, the panorama stretching with buildings on buildings, before an explosion (with a visual nod to Akira) rips through the towers of steel and stone and ruins the landscape. The disaster signals a reprieve for one Nathan Spencer, the Bionic Commando, wrongly imprisoned and lacking his defining equipment. Twenty years after the original release, and set ten years after the events of the original game, the last word of game footage seen thus far is from his fans as well as Spencer himself: "Finally".

Nathan Spencer now has dreadlocks, which accentuate his momentum, while his bionic arm in its new form is as dynamic as you'd hope, promising opportunities beyond what has been shown thus far, likely to include spectacularly oversized blasting capabilities and rappelling. The environment is also a playground full of things to throw at the hapless enemy soldiers, the arm capable of grasping objects and sending them huge distances at speed with either a straight throw or a lob. Being a 40kg piece of machinery it's also useful for beating up opposition, allowing you to throttle one enemy while shooting his comrades, before dismissing him with an uppercut.

The most important of the arm's abilities and the core of the game, however, is swinging. A demonstration at Capcom's recent Gamers Day concentrated entirely on the swing mechanic, the primary responsibility of Swedish developer Grin. Thankfully, it showed that it works and then some: compared to the disappointing *Spider-Man 3*, this feels like a genuine evolution for the ability. There is a mixture of auto and manual aiming, the latter aided by a jump with a great deal of hang time, and no fixed swing points – any surface not tainted by radiation can be attached to and swung from, with a chunky kinetic motion that makes the cord react as it should to mass and momentum. The area shown was limited, but demonstrated that the Bionic Commando's weight will affect how structures react to your swinging – a smashed monorail being gradually pulled off its track after a few pendulous swings, for example. The bionic arm and its swinging motion will define whether the game either innovates successfully or falls over, and it's testament to Capcom and Grin that it's working so well at the time of first announcing the game.

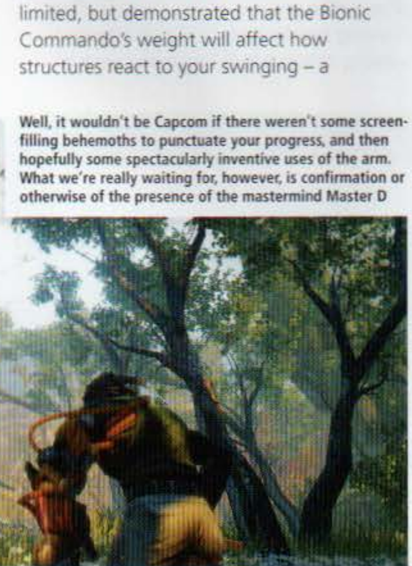
Few plot details are known, although it is confirmed that returning to earlier areas (as in the first NES game) with more abilities will be part of the structure. Quite apart from lists of facts, however, what could be crucial to *Bionic Commando*'s development is the commitment of the team behind it. "I consider the original to have one of the best ignored mechanics in gaming," says producer **Ben Judd**, "and people write stuff like 'You're killing my childhood'. This is my childhood, too, and I want to make a great game." And as for the comparisons to a certain other swinging game? "It'll be better than *Spider-Man*: if it's not, I'll give you my address and you can bomb me." Duly noted.





Bionic Commando rewards the free-falling impulse. The locations shown thus far have been overwhelmingly city-based, and focus on the aftermath of the bomb – which, rather conveniently, has left girders and their swingable like as the major elements constructing the landscape





Well, it wouldn't be Capcom if there weren't some screen-filling behemoths to punctuate your progress, and then hopefully some spectacularly inventive uses of the arm. What we're really waiting for, however, is confirmation or otherwise of the presence of the mastermind Master D

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE/GRIN**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN/SWEDEN**
RELEASE: **TBA**



What's in a name?

The original *Bionic Commando*'s legacy is obvious in even the colourings of the red-suited enemies and the green-suited commando. The Badds are back, although now referred to as the Imperials, though there's no word on whether the infamous bad guy Master D will make his return. It could also be pointed out that Nathan Spencer wasn't the name of the original Bionic Commando, but thanks to the various re-releases it could be any of Super Joe, Radd Spencer or Ladd Spencer. Super Joe was also the star of the original *Commando* and, despite his no longer being the canonical BC, makes a comeback as your 'Supervisor' Joe Bishop.

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **EA REDWOOD SHORES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q3 2008**

Dead Space

Here's hoping it won't live up to its name





Mutated ex-humans are the order of the day, with the game's hero, a mechanical engineer named Isaac Clarke, having to face up to self-preservation alone

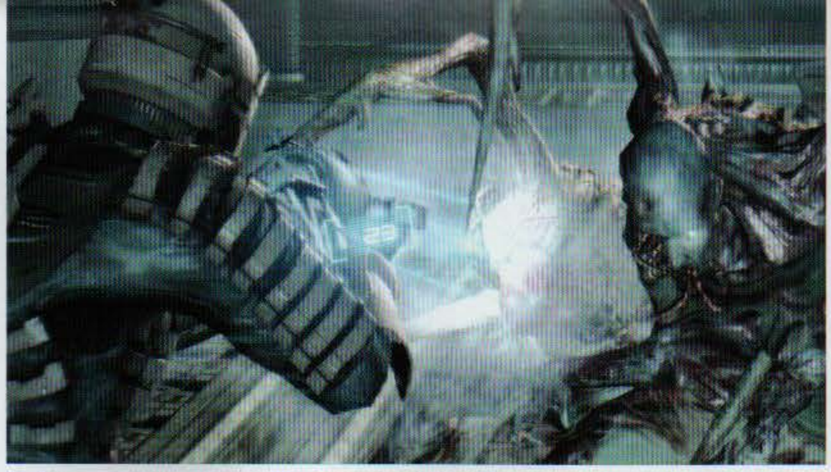
Survival horror's cinematic precursor, Alien, drew a large proportion of its thrills from being set in space, but games have tended to stick to more earthly (and earthy) locations with zombies. Perhaps *Dino Crisis 3* is part of the reason why.

EA has decided to set its new excursion into survival horror in space, and it has high ambitions, according to executive producer **Glen Schofield**: "We aim to make the scariest game ever made." Certainly, its roots are obvious – it's set on a ship invaded by an organism that has mutated its crew.

What EA hopes will distinguish *Dead Space* is a 'dismemberment' system, which allows players to use the ship's mining tools, designed to break rock, to cut through the alien scourge's limbs instead. The idea is that, with meagre ammunition supplies, the onus is on players to strategically disable foes, because enemy AI will incorporate the loss of appendages into its reckoning.

Dead Space will also include gravity and stasis guns which, with the addition of weightless sections, will mean that the manipulation of gravity and time will also be part of the mix. These will be incorporated into physics puzzles, which have potential to transcend *Resident Evil*'s bizarre set-gem-into-statue's-head challenges.

But it's unlikely cerebral tinkering will be *Dead Space*'s mainstay. It's the gory business of dismemberment that best represents this new attempt at creating a cinematic shocker. "*Dead Space* combines the tension of survival horror games with the bone fragments and arterial spray of Hollywood horror," says Schofield.

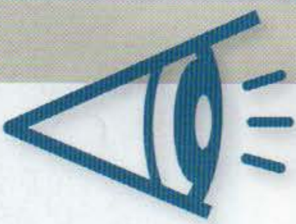








The mining theme runs deep, with the industrial ship on which the game is set designed to carve city-sized chunks of rock out of planets and render them down. Weaponry therefore includes the plasma cutter, a mining tool designed for small pieces, and the line gun, which can cut away several enemy limbs with each discharge



FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 23**

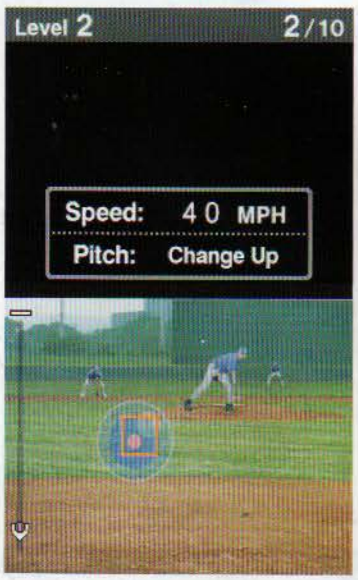
Sight Training

Nintendo lines up yet another piece of self-improvement software – but is its purpose a little too difficult to see?

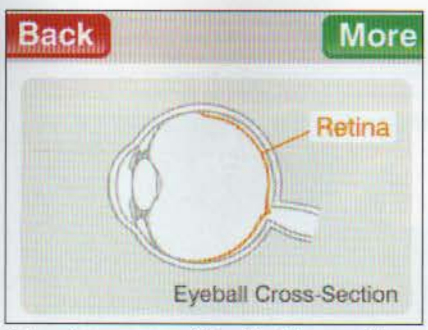
The recent Mind Body and Console showcase gave Nintendo the platform to show off the latest product in its training range, securing an explanation of its possible benefits from Liverpool University's head of orthoptics, Dr Gail Stephenson. However, perhaps the necessity for such an explanation suggests that, unlike previous training games, *Sight Training* may be inobvious in its intended effects. It does not, for example, work to improve your distance vision, or mitigate astigmatism. It will not cure glaucoma or cataracts. What it does do is aid your brain in its visual perception, working on five areas in which top athletes apparently excel.

The format is, as with other training games, a series of daily tasks designed to decrease the oddly arbitrary concept of your 'Eye Age'. To this end you tap red squares as they appear on screen to build hand-eye co-ordination, try to determine which moving box a ball is under, and match shapes or numbers that have been briefly flashed in the periphery of your vision. Your chaperone this time is a pixellated figure no less verbose than his professorial predecessors – and nor is his dialogue any quicker to click through.

Quite how easy it will be to convey *Sight Training*'s concept will remain to be seen, but, in this case, a misunderstanding of its benefits regarding acuity of vision might garner it more sales. Either way, along with *Face Training*, it might be well-received among those who like the idea of daily self-improvement, but find the more cerebral alternatives not to their taste.







As in previous games, your daily training is interrupted by explanatory screens, only some of which are truly informative

FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **MONOLITH SOFTWARE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBA**

Disaster: Day Of Crisis

Earth, wind and fire make yet another sensational comeback with their greatest hits



Trailers thus far have shown buildings, landmarks and people being devastated by natural phenomena – such as waves swamping a city. If *D: DOC* can maintain this portentous atmosphere in-game, it could be exceptional



Always eat your five a day

One of the more interesting aspects of Irem's *Disaster Report* games was that the characters would have needs beyond a health bar. In the first title this took the rather crude form of a 'QP bar' that reflected your character's water levels – you had to frequently stop and take a drink as well as occasionally providing for other people, and finding water sources was often a priority. In *Disaster Report 2* both body temperature and food played crucial roles, and both were affected by the nature of the problem being faced by the player. *Disaster: Day Of Crisis* does have indicators other than the player's health currently shown in the HUD (and Monolith has an RPG background), so expect a combination of the earlier games' tricks to add a little more mental preparation to the peril-dodging.











Dying civilians can be resuscitated (Ray's background is in the rescue services) in the aftermath of disasters, while terrorists will look to take full advantage of the situation

Irem's *Disaster Report* and its sequel were games based on surviving natural disasters that, though never achieving excellence, proved that a good game could be built around exceptional natural events. Monolith Software, which in May this year became a subsidiary of Nintendo, is now producing what is very much the spiritual successor to this series – *Disaster: Day Of Crisis*.

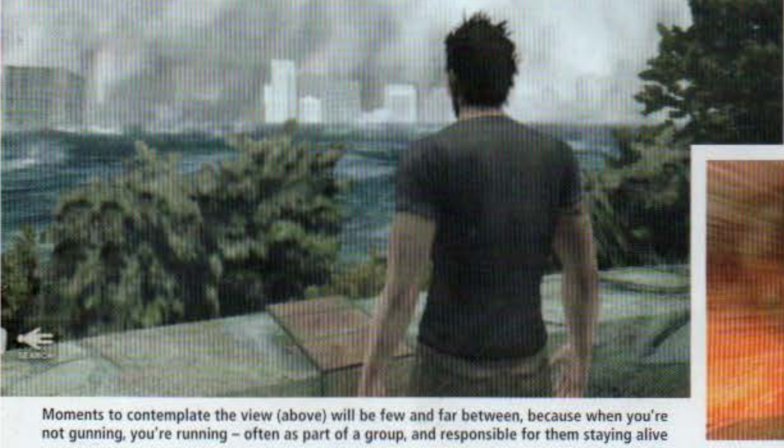
Where the two earlier games were set in highly artificial places (a purpose-built island and the like) to aid the game design, *Disaster: Day Of Crisis* is focusing on one day in which a host of natural phenomena occur at once, forcing the government into a rearguard action of rescuing as many civilians as possible. A group of terrorists take advantage of this situation, a bad day gets worse, and naturally your character is stuck right in the middle.

There are three key elements to the game. One is simply surviving: often, a dangerous situation has to be worked through (such as a hailstorm of lava boulders) or prepared for as well as possible, and in these moments the game seems a fine action puzzler. It doesn't look particularly outstanding, though its characters are solid and certain aspects of the world are rendered admirably, but emphasis will obviously be more on physics recreating the impact of specific phenomena, charging you with avoiding encroaching lava, trying to survive falling buildings during an earthquake, and swimming in a city-engulfing flood.

But *Disaster: Day Of Crisis* is not merely about survival in the face of overwhelming odds: there are those terrorists to worry about, too. While you're facing down the volcanoes and tsunamis, their 'rogue special forces unit' has seized a nuclear weapon. In practice, this means that your character and his fine sideburns fight against an army of terrorists at every opportunity, with a cover system allied to *Resident Evil 4*-style shoulder aiming – but you also have to concentrate on helping civilians. If close to death they can occasionally be revived, but if you lose track of your own health, dehydration or damage will cause you to lose concentration when fighting enemy troops, never mind hanging over precipices.

The third element to the game is driving. Thus far, Ray has been seen desperately speeding away from lava down a hillside, and racing through built-up streets flanked by helicopters – sensational stuff, but you may more often end up using vehicles to travel quickly between urgent objectives and transport injured civilians to safety.

Disaster's conflicting elements have the potential to lift each other above the usual, and if Monolith can craft a structure that can accommodate the small shootouts as well as the big set pieces, this could be a hell of a ride.







Moments to contemplate the view (above) will be few and far between, because when you're not gunning, you're running – often as part of a group, and responsible for them staying alive





The visual flair in *Super Smash Bros Brawl* can be seen in almost any aspect of the game – the excellent realisations of older games in some of the backgrounds is a particular nostalgic treat



FORMAT: **Wii**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **JANUARY 24 (JAPAN), FEBRUARY 10 (US), Q1 2008 (EUROPE)**

Super Smash Bros Brawl

Nintendo's prize fighters have been in training, and they're ready to deliver a knockout blow

Super Smash Bros has never seemed a subtle game, dedicated as it is to diverse and colourful characters beating each other up, but its simplistic controls and 'ring out' rules conceal a surprising depth. The newest incarnation is shaping up to be as gleefully brash as its predecessors, with a wealth of content and customisation that borders on the obsessive: it's a measure of the encompassing vision of Masahiro Sakurai and his team that it would be no great surprise if there was a weapon called the kitchen sink.

Basic *Super Smash Bros* rules remain in *Brawl*: up to four characters battle in an arena, with a percentage going upwards to indicate the damage taken, and knockouts caused when a character falls off the stage – the more damaged the character, the further they fly when hit. With four players, there's no fighting game quite like the GameCube's *Super Smash Bros Melee*, and this fine-tuned balance should be retained in *Brawl*, with the only significant change in balance brought about by the introduction of a 'Final Smash' special move. For the first time in the series, fighters will also be able to compete online with either friends or random players – although Nintendo has emphasised that the communication features (you can assign one of four phrases to the D-pad for taunting) will only be available with friends. Outside of multiplayer, 'The Subspace Emissary' is a full side-scrolling adventure, which looks to improve significantly on *Melee*'s rather weak attempt at the same, while Classic mode (a more traditional beat 'em up) returns.

The character roster has, for the first time, expanded outside of Nintendo's lineage. The most-wanted character among fans (in polls on the official Nintendo Japan website) was Sonic the Hedgehog, who has been duly delivered. The other big non-Nintendo name appearing is Solid Snake, who looks to have been treated with an alternately serious and comic touch that would do Kojima Productions proud, a highlight being a codec conversation with Roy Campbell about battling Mario ("This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance, Snake, now get out there and show him what you're made of!"). As well as these two, there are series debuts for Diddy Kong, King Dedede, the Pokémon Trainer (who stays in the background and fights using Charizard, Squirtle and Ivysaur), and Pit (*Kid Icarus*), as well as every character that featured in the previous *Smash Bros* games. The stages are mostly themed around individual characters – surely there will have to be a Green Hill Zone for Sonic – and stages will change throughout the battle (such as the Battlefield stage cycling between day and night).

Nintendo is stepping far beyond what most *Smash Bros* fans dreamed of, and the list of new features and characters goes on. There are video replays, snapshots and badges to add to the above, and it seems almost superfluous to mention that this is one of the best-looking Wii games to date. For those who like the series' brand of fighting action, this looks essential.



Anytime, anyplace

One of *Super Smash Bros Brawl*'s features is a level-building tool which allows you to choose the basic characteristics of a stage before constructing it over a grid with a drag-and-drop interface. The various building bricks can be rotated, enlarged and customised before being placed, and you can try out the stage with your chosen character for practicality. Stages can be exchanged between friends, but the most interesting aspect of the announcement is that stages can be submitted to Nintendo. There are plans for one stage a day to be sent to players via the net, then vanishing at the end of the day – as the Smash Bros Dojo puts it, for 'a once-in-a-lifetime encounter'.



Meta Knight (above) is one of the new faces, along with the Pokémon Trainer and Lucas (right), but all will inevitably be overshadowed by Sonic's appearance



Sakurai has been keen to emphasise that the team have put significant energy into the singleplayer campaign (left) and want it to stand alone from the multiplayer modes, going to the extent of making a unique story route for each character







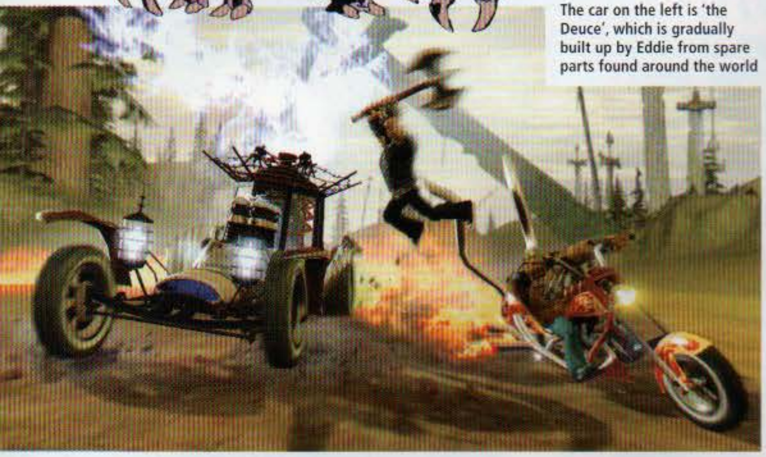
Giga-Bowser returns in *Brawl* as Bowser's 'Final Smash' move, a new addition to the series triggered when a character picks up a rare 'Smash Ball' item. Moves vary in their details, but the result is always the same: WHACK



FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SIERRA ENTERTAINMENT**
DEVELOPER: **DOUBLE FINE PRODUCTIONS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **TBA 2008**

Brutal Legend

Tim Schafer's new hero has more than one axe to grind



The car on the left is 'the Deuce', which is gradually built up by Eddie from spare parts found around the world





Tim Schafer is turning his hand to life on the road. More specifically, life as a roadie: *Brutal Legend* centres on Eddie Riggs, voiced by Jack Black, who by bleeding on his belt buckle transports himself to another dimension where demons have enslaved humanity. Tough crowd.

Behind the stylings, *Brutal Legend* is essentially a thirdperson action game. Eddie uses his guitar to cast spells and engage certain types of foe, but it's a backup to a more conventional kind of axe for slicing through the enemies. There will also be various musical 'types' that can be defeated and then recruited, such as other roadies, headbangers, bouncers and fire barons (who trap enemies in circles of flame with their choppers). Eddie also has 'the Deuce', a beast of a coupe, and magic attacks such as a 'face-melting' solo that works literally.

The usual flights of fancy to be expected from Schafer's work are in evidence – such as General Lionwhite, who has such luscious hair he uses it to fly – and the entire world is themed under the banner of rock music.







The fighting is significantly more, well, brutal than might be expected, but it's all done with tongue wedged firmly in cheek and highly amusing – especially against spiders

There's a certain kind of coherence in seeing temples covered with spandex next to amps carved out of mountains, and screenshots show Eddie seeing off hordes of goths as well as what look like heavy-metal trolls.

Brutal Legend has its work cut out in an overpopulated genre, but its stylings and anarchic humour will at least distinguish it from other treatments. Will it offer enough variety to stand alongside *Psychonauts*, though?

Condemned 2: Bloodshot

Not content with bringing us Gil Grissom's worst nightmare once, Monolith tries to go one worse



FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q1 2008**





In addition to an expanded range of melee attacks, Ethan Thomas can also make use of environmental weapons

An antique family crypt on Halloween provides a hauntingly appropriate backdrop for Sega's latest demonstration of the next chapter in the life of Ethan Thomas, the (now fingerless) protagonist of the original *Condemned*. Having become a bona-fide crazy after events in the first game, the start of the sequel finds him destitute on the streets, before he is, inevitably, recruited again to spearhead the serious crime unit's investigation into some suitably horrible goings-on.

The latest demo picks up where the last one left off, providing a further glimpse of the nastiness that Monolith has in store. A lot of it is pretty familiar: the rubble-strewn, dilapidated architectural aesthetic; the teasing glimpses of enemies; the similarly nasty assortment of ill and mean-looking crazies hell-bent on ending Ethan's investigation early. The most obvious difference is in the visceral extent of combat, which becomes clear as Ethan finds himself isolated from the rest of his investigating team thanks to a malfunctioning elevator. As he's set about by a series of assailants, he's forced to defend himself with an extended range of melee options, including context-sensitive manoeuvres, executed by following QTE-style on-screen instructions, and an expanded range of basic moves.





Sure, drug-crazed enemies jumping out from behind you is a bit of a cheap trick, but it's also an effective one

But it's the intensity of the combat that really sets this sequel apart from its predecessor: thanks to the extra tactical dimension, melee seems to take longer now, so the grisly screen effects that accompany the thumps and whacks seem even more difficult to bear. Which just adds to the spiralling sense of discomfort that Monolith has distilled so superbly from the first game.

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SIERRA**
DEVELOPER: **REBELLION**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **JANUARY**







Apart from wrist blades, the Predator weapons – staff, throwing disc, shoulder cannon and new hand cannon – can only be equipped two at a time. An Alien sensor and a detector for Predator technology join the heat vision

Aliens Vs Predator: Requiem

Rebellion returns to the ultimate creature-feature grudge match, but this time Hollywood is calling the fight

And so it comes full circle. Rebellion's *Alien Vs Predator*, an early FPS for the Atari Jaguar and later PC, wasn't the first incarnation of this stalwart crossover series; that distinction belongs to the comic books. It was influential, though, videogames being a perfect stage for this clash of creatures, and it partly inspired director Paul Anderson to make 2004's AvP movie. Now that film has a sequel, and that sequel has a tie-in game, and Rebellion finds itself getting reacquainted with some old, ugly friends.

The Predator's mission to clean up the crash provides a real rarity in games: cast-iron, plot-based motivation for obsessive item collection. Completists will be scouring levels for face huggers and fragments of Predator technology



This time there was no room in the six-month development time for alien or human perspectives on the action – or to bring it to platforms other than PSP. A good thing that Rebellion is a dab hand at PSP action games, notably last year's co-op shooter, *Miami Vice*. *Requiem* casts the player as the movie's 'cleaner' Predator, culling an Alien outbreak in Colorado after a Predator ship crashes, and destroying the evidence.

There's still some mileage made from the three-way conflict, with the Alien and human AI interacting with each other as well as targeting you. An honour point system penalises needless human kills as well as serving as the basis for replay sessions of this short, triple-route shooter. Popping into a motionless firstperson view allows a Predator to 'mark' targets, increasing their honour value; a crude but effective stab at increasing challenge and evoking the thrill of the hunt.

With a five-minute survival mode to satisfy co-op multiplayer urges or a quick fix, *AVP: Requiem* is shaping up to be a basic but polished actioner. Above all, Rebellion knows this material inside out – maybe even better than the filmmakers – and so the Predator's all-important weapons, vision modes and stealth camouflage are put at the heart of the experience and replicated as beautifully as the PSP will allow. Given the time and content restraints of this particular film tie-in, that's all any fan could ask.

Apollo Justice: Ace Attorney

Will Capcom ever make any fundamental changes to the Ace Attorney games? Res ipsa loquitur

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA 2008 (EUROPE)**





The interface is the same as it's ever been for questioning witnesses, and the trademark leaps of the series are present and correct, Apollo often offering voluminous explanations of an item's import beyond your knowledge

The trailer for the fourth in the *Ace Attorney* series begins in a corridor, with red lace and pale walls surrounding a picture of Phoenix Wright, framed in wrought gold. Next to it, there's an equally ornate frame with a blank canvas – waiting for the 'thunderous' Apollo Justice to make his mark. The new and bombastically named star of the series, Justice is a young fellow with 'a passionate heart burning red' and begins his first day in court by stammering in front of everyone and then finding out that he has to defend his hero Phoenix Wright from a murder charge.

Business as usual, then. The new lead is backed up by some new, and several old, characters, the pick of whom looks to be 'Gentlemanly' Kristoph Gavin, the smooth and polite prosecutor. The game works as ever, with witness statements being pored over and evidence brought out to contradict or otherwise, and the battle cries of 'objection!' and 'hold it!' return in all their technicolour glory. There are the usual excellently realised animations and exchanges reacting to the progress of the case, and particular praise has to be given to the script, which looks to be as tight and humorous as the previous games.



Among the changes for this relaunch of the series is a simplified anime look for the characters, far removed from the more detailed visuals of the *Phoenix Wright* games, but not without their own charm in the details

There are some new features in the game, the best of which looks to be a zoom feature that allows Apollo to examine pressured witnesses for visual 'tells' – and brings with it a new 'right there!' battlecry. But it's fundamentally unchanged from the *Phoenix Wright* iterations of the *Ace Attorney* series – no bad thing, admittedly – the only disappointment being that the complex narrative has been carried over from those games, and thus the opportunity to use the new lead to break away from the past has been missed.



Living legends

Renowned for their detailed historical battles, the creators of Total War have set out to conquer myth

Since its acquisition by Sega two years ago, Creative Assembly's empire has rapidly expanded – so much so that it has had to form two separate colonies at either end of the modest market town of Horsham. One houses the team behind revolutionary RTS franchise *Total War*, and the other the team behind the upcoming *Viking: Battle For Asgard*. Recently voted the ninth nicest place to live in Britain, Horsham's quiet conservative streets might not seem such an incongruous setting for the company that produced *Total War* – a series that is contentedly bookish in its recreation of historical minutiae. But *Viking* is quite a different proposition; although the game shares something of *Total War*'s epic scale, it is in most other ways its polar opposite: an adrenalising, gratuitously bloody affair that gleefully casts aside the historical fidelity which has been the hallmark of the company's flagship RTS.

"I'm sure our use of Viking mythology probably gets a couple of the *Total War* historians' eyes rolling into the back of their heads," says lead programmer **Clive Gratton**. "They probably see *Viking* and go: 'Those fucking console boys!' We're like teenagers who don't give a shit."

TITLE: **VIKING: BATTLE FOR ASGARD**
FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **CREATIVE ASSEMBLY**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **Q1 2008**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E181**

TITLE: **EMPIRE: TOTAL WAR**
FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **CREATIVE ASSEMBLY**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **2008**

Having such a marked difference between its current projects isn't an unfamiliar experience for Creative Assembly: the company has for a long time offered two distinct lines of products – the more console-focused team originally made sports games for EA before moving on to *Spartan: Total Warrior*, and now *Viking*, an all-out action affair, revelling in the fantastical violence offered by myth and legend.

Taking on the role of a single Viking hero, the player frees a series of islands from the nefarious influence of the goddess Hel – mixing free-roaming exploration of the island with vast, bloody warfare, involving thousands upon thousands of men; your actions on the battlefield radically altering the flow of the entire encounter; your choices of which resources to liberate first defining your options in later engagements. Although with *Viking*'s sprawling battlefields the game could be seen to be moving closer to the *Total War* series, the excessive amounts of blood and directness of the action quickly set it apart from *Total War*'s sober strategising.

"We end up with some degree of strategic involvement in our battles, just because, as the saying goes, if you're a pea on the plate, you can't understand what the whole dinner is," Gratton says. "So you need to have a profound effect on the battle. However, our game is all about giving the user a thrill: jaw-dropping fucking yeah wow! That's not really what the realtime strategy is about. It's a properly intelligent pursuit. Ours, well, ours isn't. It's cinema."



Viking marks a departure from the regimented combat of *Total War*. "Shoguns and the like are all very clinical," says Rodgers. "With *Viking* it's all about turning yourself into an unstoppable force with blunt, rusty blades"

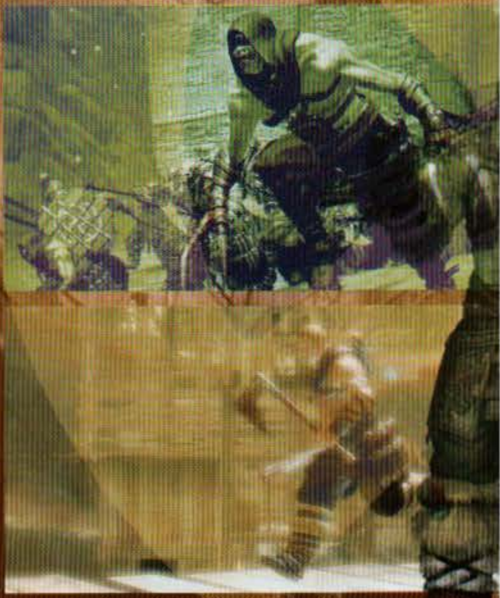
We ask if the *Viking* team see this latest game as a natural progression from *Spartan* – applying similar gameplay ideas to a new cultural setting, just as the *Total War* games have carried their core elements from era to era.

"It's quite a substantially different game from *Spartan*," says **Col Rodgers**, the project's senior designer, a little nonplussed by the suggestion. "I mean, obviously, it involves hitting people with weapons but that's pretty much where the similarity ends."

"*Spartan* was all about its set-pieces," says Gratton. "The idea to go to a free-roaming situation wasn't really on our minds with *Spartan*. If *Viking* has anything in common with *Spartan* in terms of lineage, it'd be the idea of a big massive spectacle – with hundreds of thousands of men in this case. That's the kind of thing, as a company, we're very interested in. We avoid using thirdparty solutions so we can push areas of technology that end up with interesting gameplay. So, for instance, you'd never be able to have 1,000 men, independently animated and doing AI, using some thirdparty software. And it was the same with *Spartan* in the respect that we pushed the PS2 and original Xbox. So that application of tech means that we can explore areas of gameplay that other companies wouldn't necessarily have."

While this is certainly true of *Viking*, its individuality may not be immediately apparent – careless readers of this magazine might make





"Easy entry," says Rodgers, when we ask about *Viking*'s comparative focu on instant gratification. "*Viking* has got to be pick-up-and-play. There's a big time investment in *Total War*, which you don't really see on consoles"







Gratton relates a rejected slogan for the game: "The Vikings are the nastiest bunch of people. They raped and pillaged all around the world. Those are the good guys"

the easy mistake of lumping *Viking* in with the large number of hack-and-slash titles and *Dynasty Warriors* knock-offs that have suddenly begun to flood in with the latest technological advances.

"Many of the elements we are presenting to the player may well be familiar but the combination of these elements isn't," says Gratton. "We're sort of cherry-picking new and interesting ideas for gameplay that other people are exploiting, but then bringing them together into a package that isn't directly comparable to other games. There are free-roaming elements, but then in a lot of free-roaming games moment-to-moment combat is a secondary thing and not direct and involving. Many games where you have that direct control in combat aren't free-roaming and just chain together set-pieces."

At a time when many games feel obliged to use the new hardware's increased grunt, but don't quite understand how or why they should, *Viking*'s heavily populated world looks to be underpinned by sensible design. The epic nature of its battles is not simply the result of cramming more bodies on screen, but also arises from the intelligence with which the armies' objectives are organised, and how the player's abilities alter the flow of battle in a realistic way, creating interest in strategy above button-mashing.

"I guess because of our background, we're effectively ahead of the curve with respect to massively populated worlds," says Gratton. "Everybody is obviously going to do that now because it's an instant possibility on this generation of hardware, but then, for instance, we're doing some really cool pathfinding solutions as well. That's not something you end up with in *Dynasty Warriors* knock-offs, where you may have hundreds of people but most of the time they're playing exactly the same animation or standing still and ignoring you. Generating that realistic movement of large numbers of troops – obviously there's a crossover there with our strategy games. It's certainly not shared code, but there are a lot of shared ideas."

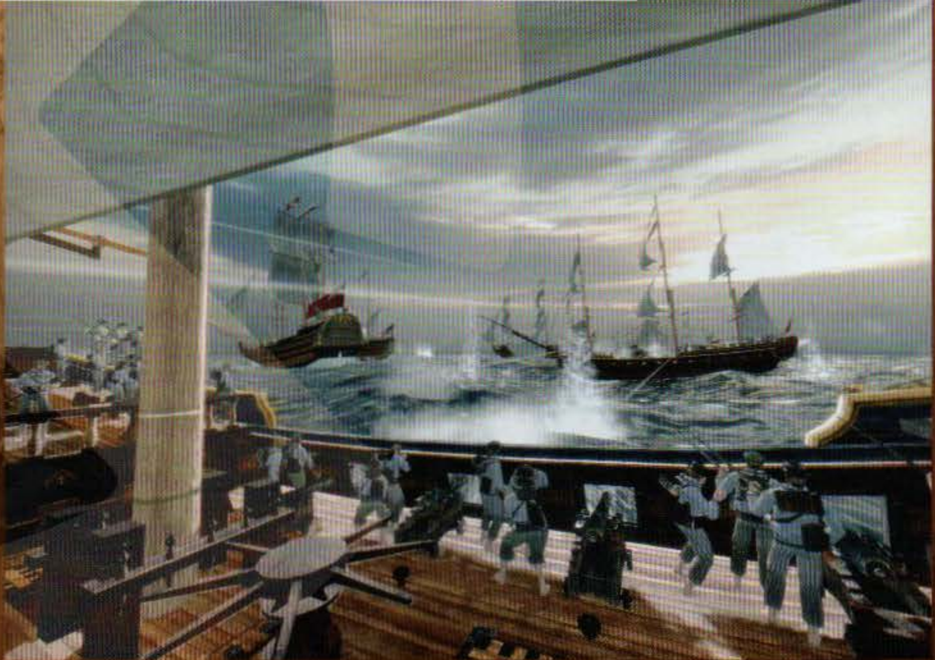
It is this thoughtful application of technology, above anything else, that unites the two projects, and has defined Creative Assembly's development to date; it was the company's non-intuitive use of new technology that enabled the evolutionary *Shogun: Total War*.

"The way the whole *Total War* series came about was mostly accidental," says studio head **Mike Simpson**. "*Command & Conquer* had come out and been very successful and there were quite a lot of developers making cheap clones, like *Kill, Crush And Destroy*, which had sold rather well. We looked at those and thought, blimey, that's easy; we could do that. It was fairly early on that we began to see that we could do something more interesting and we changed our plan."

"Graphics cards were just becoming prevalent," says Gratton. "As a result, developers were producing polygonal worlds for the first time which could be run by enough people to actually generate income. We took a little step back at that point – everyone else was struggling with polygonal tech trying to put just five characters on the screen; we realised that if we used sprites we could do thousands of characters."

"At some point during the proceedings," continues Simpson, "we thought, well, why not shift the camera down into the general's eyes









The amount of research behind *Empire* is huge. "For each unit there's about a hundred different pieces of information that have to be gathered," says Simpson



and look out across the 3D landscape? The initial response to that was: 'Don't be daft, we can't do that'. It would have meant doing curved surfaces for the hills in 3D, and nobody had done splines in realtime before. It was generally deemed to be impossible. But no, it wasn't. There turned out to be a neat maths solution which made it easy. So suddenly we ended up with a 3D battlefield – and out of that came *Shogun*."

The game that emerged clearly had a winning format – one that could be used to explore other historical settings; one that could be expanded upon. Successive *Total War* games have done just that, employing an alternate evolution-revolution cycle of development, as Simpson explains: "At the point where we finished *Shogun* we started doing two new games – we did the sequel to *Shogun* which was *Medieval: Total War*, but also started on *Rome: Total War* which was a four-year project rather than a two-year project. *Medieval II* was an evolution based on the *Rome* engine and *Empire: Total War* is the revolution."

"I don't know what our next revolutionary step will be, but there will be one; we want to be the ones who beat our game rather than let someone else do it"

It seems an appropriate term, and not simply because this latest game is set in the age of revolution, the 18th century: of the *Total War* games so far this is easily the most impressive in its scope, encompassing a century of world politics at an unprecedented level of detail.

"The idea is that every time we have one of those revolutionary cycles we put enough new stuff in to make it feel like a completely different game," says Simpson. "Now, there are obviously common themes; the idea of the turn-based campaign and realtime battles is probably not going to change – we have toyed around with the idea of making the campaign realtime, but have generally shied away from that. We might decide in a later revolutionary iteration to do that.

"This time around, the naval battles are the big addition. It was the one thing that was really missing out of the previous games. You'd fight your battles in glorious realtime, and then you'd have a naval battle that would automatically resolve with a little picture of some ships fighting. The problem with doing naval battles is that we wanted to do it properly. We don't want to do something that is less complete than the naval battles in any other game, and there some games where that is all they do. I don't know what our next revolutionary step will be, but there will be one; we want to be the ones who beat our own game rather than let someone else do it."

What might that *Empire*-beating game be? Although the team resists projections of where they will take the franchise afterwards, Simpson gives an intriguing answer about the possibility of a modern-day *Total War*: "What we're doing with the *Total War* stuff works very well up to the end of the 19th century, I think, when you have an era of mass battles with organised ranks – it gives you a neat handle to grab things by and move them around. Once you get out of that, you could probably push it through WWI – but there's not much gameplay in WWI. And once you're out of that into modern warfare it suddenly becomes much more dispersed. That's not to say we couldn't do it, but just that it'd be very different. That would be a revolutionary step."

As for *Viking*, Gratton will only say that "there has to be potential" for the format to be transposed on to other myths. While you might fear that, with many companies, it would be possible to get stuck in a rut, Creative Assembly's output has never shown the signs of laziness that can creep into long-running franchises. In part, this must surely be because it has created games that are so tied to the technology that enables them, games which so deftly exploit the potential for increased scale with each new generation of technology. But Creative Assembly's games would be nothing without that most imperial characteristic: ambition.







Viking's combat system allows you to build up points which you can then 'spend' on more gruesome moves. "It's got to be said, the battles in *Viking* are pretty brutal," says Rodgers. "It's more Saving Private Ryan than Robin Of Sherwood, if you know what I mean"

HISTORY LESSENS

"Edutainment is an instant turn-off; it's hideous," says Simpson of the label sometimes misapplied to *Total War*. "Any educational benefit you get from *Total War* is a drive-by result. It's not what we came for – but nonetheless it's pretty strong. Maybe one day the educational sector will wake up and realise that humans are hardwired to learn through play. It's what we do. There's a lot of research showing that there's a link between adrenaline and laying down long-term memory. If you're playing a game where you're put into a raised-adrenaline state you are more receptive to remembering things. The way theorists rationalise it is that it comes from the days when being chased by a predator was a damn good thing to remember."





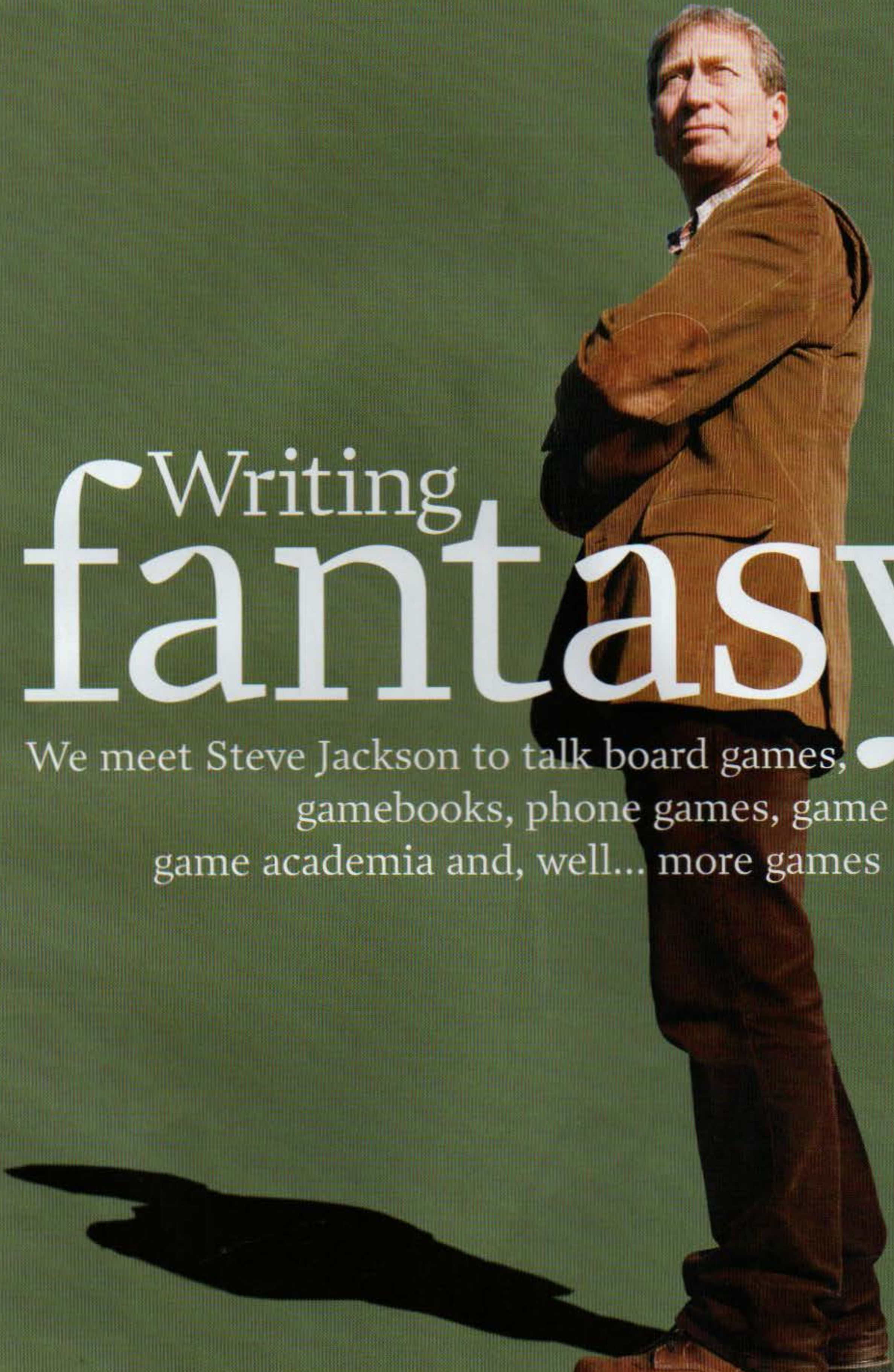




From top: studio head Mike Simpson, *Viking*'s senior designer Col Rodgers, lead programmer Clive Gratton, and art director Al Hope

Writing fantasy

We meet Steve Jackson to talk board games, gamebooks, phone games, game cards, game academia and, well... more games



You might remember his name from the bright green spine of the book that gave birth to the Fighting Fantasy phenomenon, but there's much more to **Steve Jackson**. He co-founded Games Workshop, and in doing so helped define fantasy gaming for a generation. But though fellow co-founder Ian Livingstone may have the higher profile nowadays thanks to his involvement with Eidos, Jackson has quietly remained highly active. He did, after all, establish Lionhead with Peter Molyneux, and more recently set up an MA course in videogame design at Brunel University. High time, then, for us to catch up with the man and talk gaming.

You've always had a big interest in roleplaying games and board games. Is your interest in videogames a natural extension?
I was always interested – in fact, we did a couple of games for the Commodore PET at Games Workshop. But we weren't really set up for computer games – every time we got an order we had to duplicate the tape ourselves. It was the Amiga that first did it for me. I saw *Defender Of The Crown* just after it had come out and I had to get one straight away. But one of the big reasons I got into computer games was that I had a page in the Telegraph on games in general, with a review, a feature and puzzles, and I used to get sent all these computer games.

Going on to co-found a game developer seems a bit of a leap.
Well, one of the things I did was to visit Bullfrog, because I was caught up in the hype about *Dungeon Keeper*. It sounded fantastic because it was a roleplaying game but you're the bad guy. I interviewed Peter [Molyneux], and we got on well and we started arranging these games nights together. When *Dungeon Keeper* was finished he said he was going to leave EA and start up his own company and asked whether I wanted to come along and handle the business side. Lionhead started in June 1996. It was a shame because I enjoyed the Telegraph – it was complete freedom to do whatever I wanted.

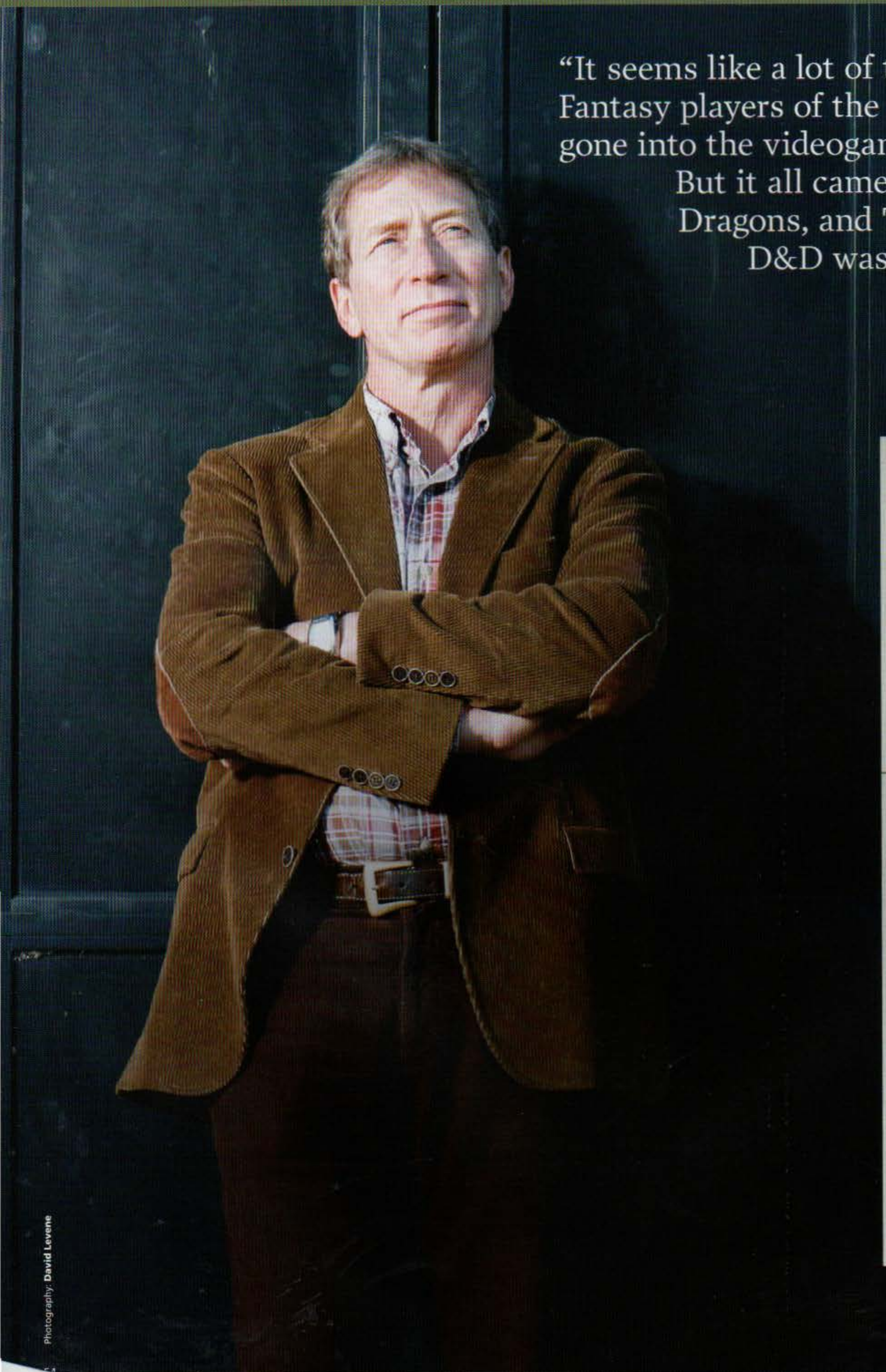
> "The kernel of a good board game is a good design idea. That's something that videogames could do more to follow"

What was the format for those gaming nights back then?
It's been going for 15 or 16 years – it's me and Ian Livingstone, Clive Robert [of *Tycoon City* maker DR Studios], Peter Molyneux and a couple of others – all old friends. We meet every three weeks or so, and play board games at each other's houses. It's a very anal thing – at the end of the year there's a trophy and it's very hard fought.

So you're still into board games? We know Ian Livingstone's a big collector.
Yes, he's a bit of a hoarder, actually. I tend to buy German games – Caylus, El Grande, anything designed by Reiner Knizia. He's probably done about 400 board games, including Lord Of The Rings for Hasbro. He's a design genius. They're always mathematically based with a really simple, unique mechanic.

Board games are still big in Germany?
Yeah, there's more of a market for board games there – Germans are bright and they go for strategy games and aren't put off by the length of the rules. If there's one game you get and you have five people, then get Caylus. The rules are quite formidable when you first look at them, but you soon realise what the designer is aiming at and how clever it is. It must have been playtested to death.

Do you feel that videogames can still learn much from board games?
The good thing about board games is simplicity – the kernel of a good board game is a good design idea. That's something that videogames could do more to follow, because they're getting so complicated. And then there's the social side – there's nothing like being in the same room and capturing someone's castle; in a board game there's all that extra room for gloating.



Photography: David Levene

"It seems like a lot of the Fighting Fantasy players of the time have gone into the videogames industry. But it all came from Dungeons & Dragons, and Tolkien, I suppose. D&D was the big influence"

Jackson of all trades

Jackson has applied himself to many different trades as well as being an author and founding a successful gaming company. He managed a restaurant with his sister, helped run the Knebworth festival ("That was a hairy time – the stories I could tell you about Led Zeppelin's manager!") and set up a dedicated fantasy art gallery in Richmond, west London, called Abandon Art, which included work by the artists that illustrated for Games Workshop and Fighting Fantasy. "I'm just always looking for something new to do," he says. He has also been a journalist for the Telegraph, writing a column covering all types of games and puzzles that ran between 1995 and 1997. Stories included who invented Monopoly ("That was a bit controversial!") and the history of playing cards (below). The impetus to cover videogames as well as traditional games didn't only come from Jackson, but one of the paper's editors. "Telegraph readers are the mature type, so I wondered who actually read it!" he concedes.



A card to suit every occasion

STEVE JACKSON

As suitcases around the nation are packed for the annual summer break, many holidaymakers will routinely take in what is undoubtedly the most versatile gaming device known to man — the humble pack of cards. But where did playing cards come from? To find out more, I spoke to author David Parlett, an acknowledged expert in the field who has written around 20 books on cards and card games.



The Fighting Fantasy series began with Warlock Of Firetop Mountain in 1982, which has been recently republished to celebrate its 25th anniversary. The edition includes a history of the book, excerpts from its first draft, a walkthrough and map, plus a complete list of the Fighting Fantasy series and associated products, from Japanese mobile games to Games Workshop miniatures

You've worked with a huge variety of media over the years.

Well, yes. Games Workshop turned into a company that published magazines, games, imported; we had shops, a factory. Then Fighting Fantasy came along and suddenly I was an author. Then I did a few game designs, and I did what I think was the world's first interactive telephone game. Originally it was supposed to be based on a Fighting Fantasy book, but in a book you can spend three pages setting the scene, and these people are paying for a premium rate call. So I designed a game from scratch called F.I.S.T. It was incredibly successful – they put an advert on the TV pages of The Mirror and got 5,000 people a day phoning in, so they put one on the back page of The Sun and it went ballistic.

And this was in the early days of interactive services via telephone.

The thing about F.I.S.T. was that it was as if someone had come along and said: "I've got this pack of cards – do you think you can come up with a game for them?" It was a wide-open field because at the time they were doing horoscope hotlines. For gaming it was a great new medium.

You also designed a collectible card game before Magic: The Gathering.

Yes, Battle Cards – 149 cards of heroes and monsters, each with a backstory. When you fought them you scratched off foil on them. There were rare cards – Wondrous Treasures – but you could send away for them if you'd defeated a certain number of enemies. There were quests as well, where you had to do things like get herbs, which were scratched off cards, but you had to know which part they were under. If you solved the quests and you got the treasures you'd be able to translate a special alphabet and find out about a 150th card, the Emperor of Vangoria. I was really chuffed – it all worked well and I had great hopes; when it came out in late '92 it was about six months ahead of Magic. It did OK, before Magic took over the universe.

Did anyone claim the Emperor card?

Merlin, the publisher, was taken over by Topps and I kind of lost touch so I've no idea how many people got it. It was probably too complicated for the time.

Looking back to Fighting Fantasy, out of you and Ian, you seemed to explore the more inventive concepts.

I was looking at all the genres, really, and seeing what could be done with the system. I'd done Citadel Of Chaos, Warlock Of Firetop Mountain and the Sorcery series, so I'd done my groundwork in fantasy. Science-fiction was the obvious alternative, and horror in House Of Hell. And superhero games were another big roleplaying market, so I did Appointment With F.E.A.R. Ian tended to stick to the core Fighting Fantasy, but they all seemed to sell! The last fantasy one I did was Creature Of Havoc. It broke the mould – you played as a monster and had to learn a language to get through.

In many ways, Fighting Fantasy and Games Workshop defined an understanding of fantasy and gaming for a generation – how do you feel about that?

I don't know. A lot of people say: "Oh, you're the guy that wrote those Fighting Fantasy books!" And it seems like a lot of the players of the time have gone into the videogames industry, and that's quite nice. But it all came from Dungeons & Dragons, and Tolkien, I suppose. D&D was the big influence. That game was so remarkable – was it really a game?

How did you make the leap from running Games Workshop to becoming one of the most successful children's authors of the time?

We were running a Games Workshop games day and Penguin Books had taken a stand. Geraldine Cooke, one of the



editors, was promoting this book called Playing Politics, a series of after-dinner games, and so we said that she should do a book about fantasy. She could see all these people playing D&D and she agreed that we should draw up a synopsis. We could just do a D&D how-to guide, but we thought it was much more interesting to do this solo game. The original synopsis for Magic Quest, as it was called, was mainly pictures with text at the bottom: 'Do you want to fight this ogre? Turn to page...' Eventually Penguin said they'd like to go with it but without all the pictures because it would cost a fortune. So it became much more text heavy. They didn't know what to do with it – I think they were in some financial patch at the time, and it sat around for six months, but good for Geraldine, she got it through.

Fighting Fantasy genuinely broke into the mainstream, and for a time it seemed like every bookshop featured those long lines of green spines.

I hated those things – they were so successful but I hated them! It was a horrible colour, but it seems to have been the right thing to do. And the logo with the sword with the little face on it. Oh God, it was awful, but it sort of worked.

"The Movies wasn't anything like as successful as we hoped it would be. The pitch was 'Be your own movie producer' and it was... Yeah. I don't know why"

Did you ever feel there were barriers to working with the theme of Fighting Fantasy?

It was great for interviews because you could explain the concept in just a few seconds. But we didn't write them for any particular type of reader – we wrote them for ourselves. It was what we were into and were thinking about, and the people that would go backwards and forwards to solve them tended to be the bright kids, eight to 16 years old, that were quite happy to sit on their own and work out the puzzles. Geraldine thought she'd like to create a series for girls, but they were quite happy reading a story rather than having to work through a game, making choices or anything like that.

Lionhead's games are also loaded with novel ideas but with mainstream appeal – is that something you aimed for with the company?

Black & White was an interesting project because it was completely new. The truth behind it all is that we didn't really know where it was going and it all came together at the end. It's more about Lionhead's background – it was always interesting what Bullfrog came up with – like *Dungeon Keeper*, turning the concept around, and *Populous*. Peter's designs always had that unique aspect. It didn't always work – *The Movies* wasn't anything like as successful as we hoped it would be. The pitch was 'Be your own movie producer' and it was... Yeah. I don't know why it didn't do so well.

Are you still involved with Lionhead?

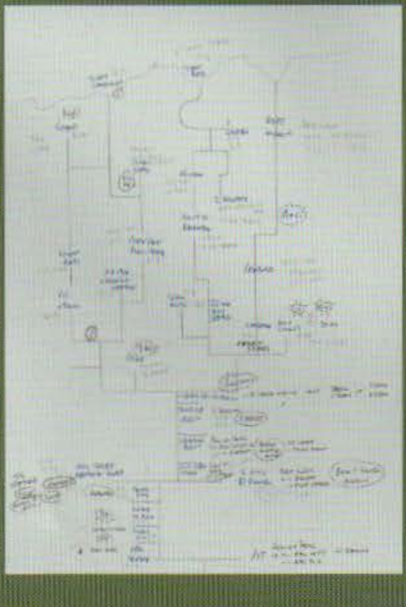
Not so much any more, ever since the Microsoft takeover. Microsoft took most of the non-development positions and at the time I was non-exec, so it came to a natural end. It was a different era at Lionhead, and there wasn't any need for me to be there. But those were great years, through *Black & White* and *Fable*. They were pretty hairy years, but it was a big adventure, and it had a happy ending.

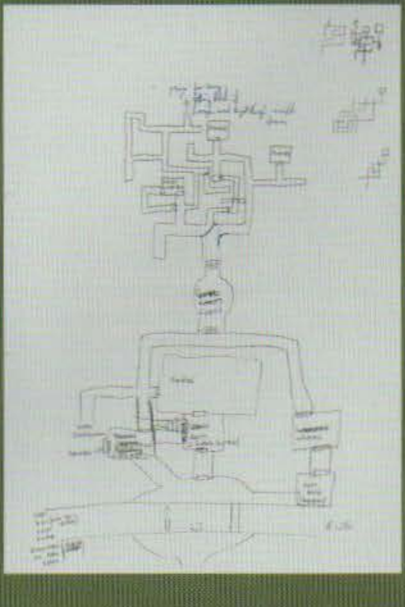
Do you fear that the big costs involved in creating today's games are repressing new ideas?

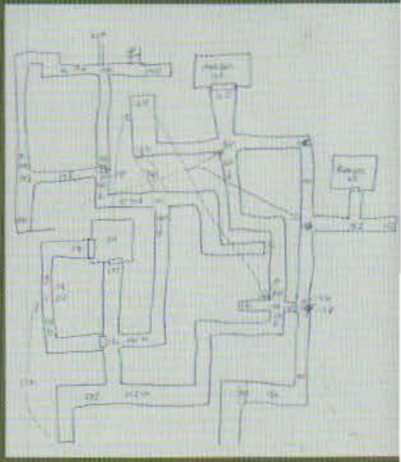
It is very difficult these days – it's quite scary actually when you think about the budgets involved. And the size of the team – if a programmer leaves halfway through a project it can really land you in the shit. But luckily, with Lionhead the



Jackson used some of the artists he and Livingstone had used for the Fighting Fantasy series to illustrate the 150 monsters, heroes and items in his Battle Cards game, and each illustrator had his own personal card







Original plans made by Jackson and Livingstone for Warlock Of Firetop Mountain, including its notorious maze (above), a section that beat many readers. Planning through flowcharts allowed the pair to ensure the game was playable once the paragraph references were jumbled up, as well as to balance the experience for difficulty



Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone went to the same school in Altrincham, and became friends when they shared a flat in London after university. They founded Games Workshop in 1975 as a chess and backgammon board maker, but soon diversified into publishing a magazine and importing some then-obscure games, notably Dungeons & Dragons

staff enjoyed working there, and they had an awful lot of freedom and so no one really let us down.

Is Microsoft successfully giving Lionhead freedom?

I think Microsoft have got deep pockets – that's their big advantage, so they can afford to experiment. But then there are other publishers that also have clout. That's the way the industry is going, really – it's crystallising into a few big publishers and developers, and a lot of in-house developers, as well. I can't really see it ever going back from this. The early days of cinema must have been similar – people could finance their own movies. But then the public demanded more and more from them, and the big studios began to control everything.

How much do you think this will be to videogaming's detriment?

Certainly on the creative side, it will be. But from a business point of view you can understand that when you sink $10 million into a project you've got to be damn sure you'll get something back.

Tell us about your MA course.

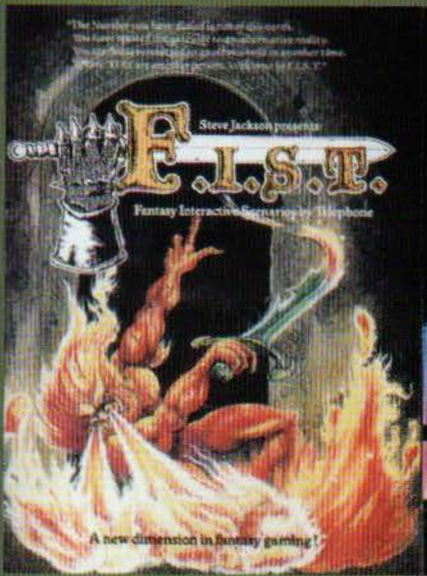
At the time the Microsoft thing was coming off, a friend of a friend had been talking to somebody who was about to start this course up at Brunel. So she got in touch to talk about it. We got on well and the course came up last year and I've been doing that. It was something I hadn't done before. It's an MA course, and we had eight students in its first year and 20 this year, including six women, which is kind of unusual, but it's great.

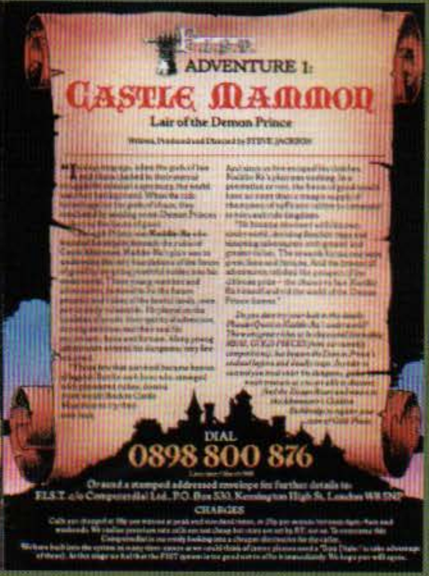
There's an argument that students need a breadth of knowledge to go into making games, rather than to specialise.

Oh, absolutely. But some of the students want to go into academia to study games, so they're not bothered about the practical exercises. Some are just looking for jobs in the industry and see it as a way of getting practical experience. Right across the country, this is like the early days of the academic study of movies and literature. You can't say that videogames are niche any more – it's going to happen, and the universities are latching on to it and offering more courses. One of the problems is how they get people with practical experience from the industry to pass on their knowledge.

We hear there's a Fighting Fantasy videogame in the works. Do you want to keep making games?

Well, there's a game I'm working on which I've got my fingers crossed about, but I can't really say much about it other than it's a game delivered in instalments, so it expands. It will become a solo roleplaying game. Whether it comes off or not... It's quite ambitious.











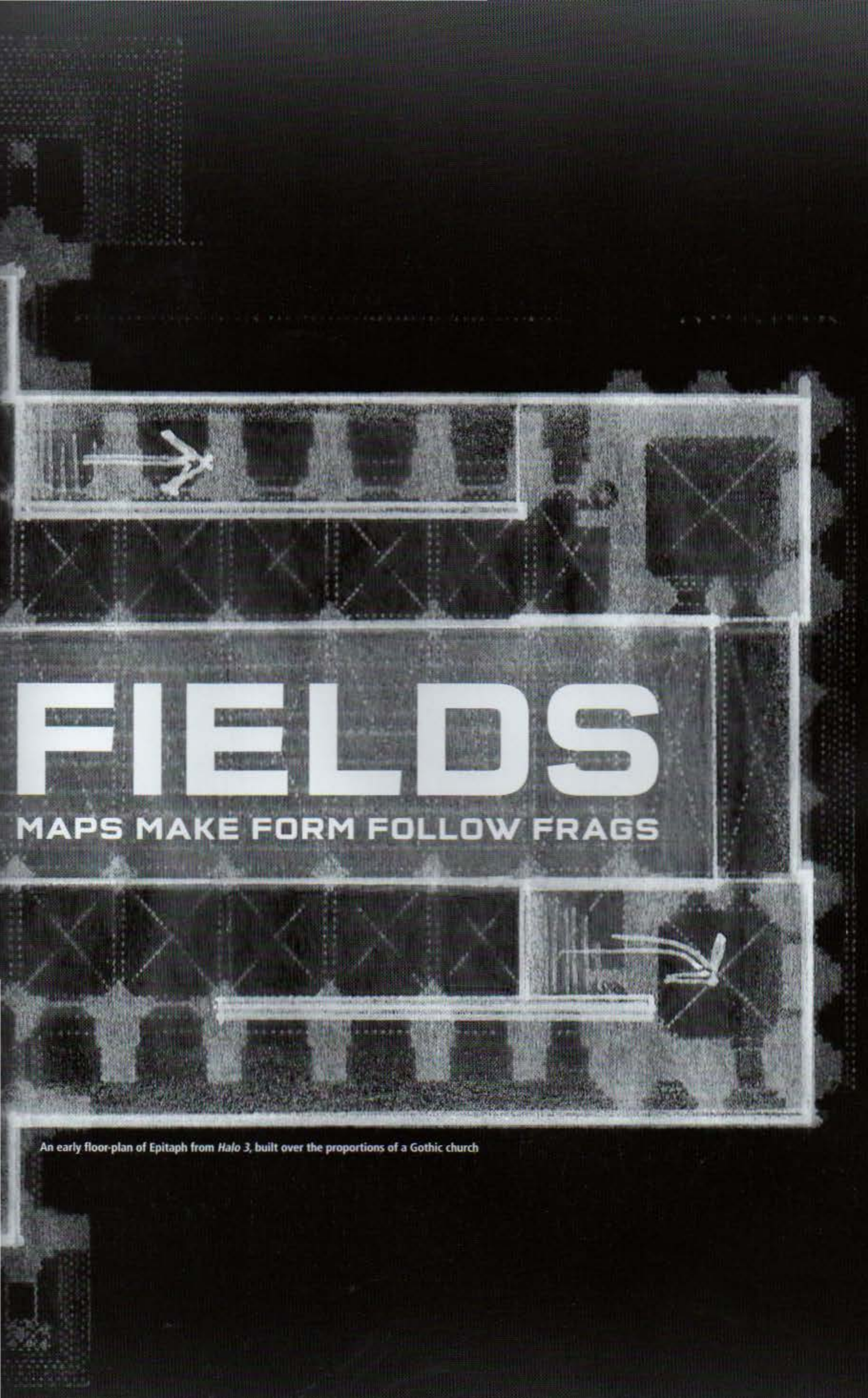
His involvement in Brunel's Games, Digital Games Theory and Design MA has made Jackson a professor. There are plans to expand the programme next year, perhaps to introduce an undergraduate game design course

There was nothing quite like F.I.S.T. (Fantasy Interactive Scenarios by Telephone) when it was launched in 1989. The technology had previously only been used for Russell Grant horoscope hotlines



KILLING

HOW ARCHITECTS OF MULTIPLAYER



FIELDS

MAPS MAKE FORM FOLLOW FRAGS

An early floor-plan of Epitaph from *Halo 3*, built over the proportions of a Gothic church

Though impossible to formally measure, Dust 2 is widely regarded as the most-played online multiplayer FPS map of all time. Even six years after its original release for *Counter-Strike*, this simple warren of orthogonal spaces is still a mainstay of server playlists. The hours its players have spent running through it, covering enemy incursions or securing areas to plant explosives, are countless. But this slice of code tuned so perfectly to generate such endlessly fascinating play wasn't designed by a professional. It was designed by **David Johnston**, now a level designer for Splash Damage but at the time studying for his A-levels.

The spaces designed for videogames are a pure form of architecture. They're functional: they aid and influence play. They're aesthetic: they look good and tell their host games' stories. And spaces designed for multiplayer maps are extreme forms of videogame architecture. Every element of these nuanced, complex spaces is designed to subtly influence players into rolling, tactical conflict – and fun – from the angle of a sniper's window to the height of a covering crate.

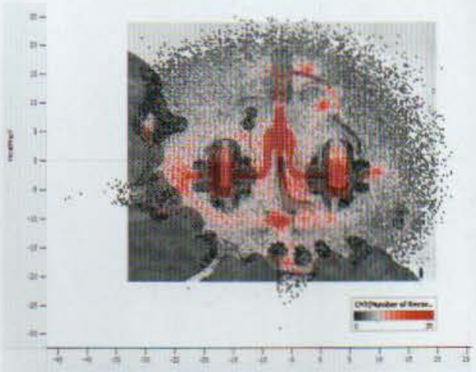
There are many types of maps catering to many different individual games and different game types: long, linear maps for objective-based games, symmetrical ones for capture-the-flag, compact interconnected ones for deathmatches. But they share a number of basic aims. One of the main considerations is something that many designers call 'flow'. "I believe a map lacks flow when players are fighting the map more than they're fighting each other," explains Johnston. "I want the player to always be able to find other players, such that

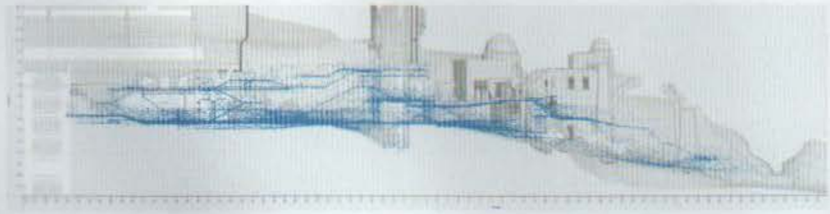
the game becomes a hunt rather than a search." What form that flow takes depends on the game. A successful map for a fast *Quake* deathmatch might allow its players to run in continuous, flowing paths that take in the main flashpoints and the desirable item pickups. One for a tactical game like *Counter-Strike* allows movements to and from the best defensive and offensive positions as the battle ebbs and surges. "I always want the player to have something to do or somewhere to be going, allowing them to work with the level and hence engage with the game," continues Johnston.

The standard means of achieving this is through making sure the entire space is interconnected, or in Free Radical Design head David Doak's term, having 'pretzel topology'. Received wisdom says that, in general, any room should have three exit points, allowing players to be able to take pickups or encounter players and escape with ease, to aid flow. But the basic point is, as **Hasit Zala**, lead programmer on *TimeSplitters 2* and *Future Perfect*, says: "The main thing is to always give the player enough options to keep the map interesting, but not so many that it becomes confusing." After all, most of the most successful maps have actually been small, simple ones, like Dust, *Halo 2*'s Lockout and *Quake*'s DM6 The Dark Zone. And, indeed, a look at the plan of Dust and Dust 2 shows that both can be rendered down to being little more than a convoluted figure of eight.

TESTING TIMES

Making sure maps are balanced – favouring no side or single form of attack or defence – is crucial. How designers achieve this varies, however. For his original Dust map, Johnston's only attempt to balance was to ensure both teams would meet exactly in the middle if they charged from their spawn points, and, incredibly, playtesting threw up only one change. Its contrast is *Halo 3*, which underwent incredibly extensive testing. The 'heat map' from Snowbound (right) shows data gathered from its beta testing, though Bungie actually relied much more on internal testing (creating kill location data like the side view of Last Resort, below) than the beta, which was more about testing networking issues.





Another big consideration is that maps should support their host game's combat design. If the game has a focus on close-quarters conflict, then the maps should reflect that with tight spaces and ample cover. "A map succeeds in [*Team Fortress 2*] when there are opportunities for all the classes to use their abilities," says **Jeff Lane**, a level designer at Valve. "That involves providing good locations for Engineers to build their sentry guns, sightlines for Snipers, and routes with cover that can help a Spy or Pyro get up nice and close in order to surprise the enemy."

Such a concentration on the essential building blocks of the game design is what Bungie believes gives *Halo*'s maps such adaptability – many are multipurpose, giving as good a game in deathmatches as they do in capture the flag rounds. "We pay attention to fundamentals," explains **Tyson Green**, *Halo 3*'s multiplayer design lead. "*Halo* fundamentally is about that combat experience, and not so muc about the higher-level goal or objective. The act of shooting or throwing a grenade is what's fun not 'I've got to the flag and grabbed it'. As long as the foundation is fun, the objectives and goa you build on top of that really just provides for different scenarios." To support this, Green pays

"HALO IS ABOUT COMBAT, AND NOT SO MUCH ABOUT THE GOAL OR OBJECTIVE. SHOOTING OR THROWING A GRENADE IS WHAT'S FUN"

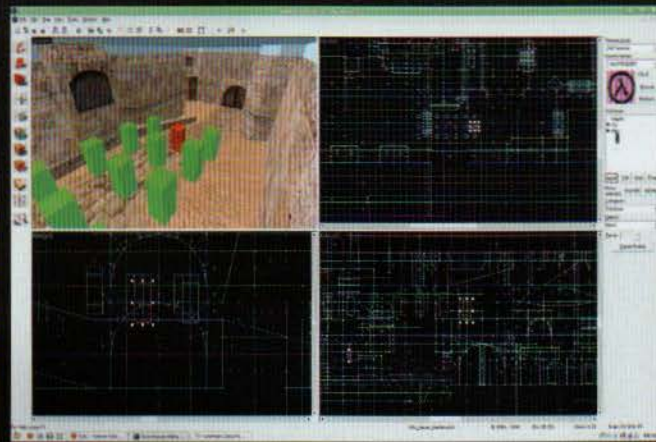






Early mood and form concepts from *Halo 3* maps show how their settings inform architectural forms. Clockwise from top left: High Ground, Guardian and base interior for Snowbound





For all their simplicity, Dust 2's unifying features of arches and road (seen here in *CS: Source*) are still iconic. And as much as they fit Dust 2's setting effortlessly, they also provide crucial support to the map's gameplay, breaking it into zones and leading the players around each main area

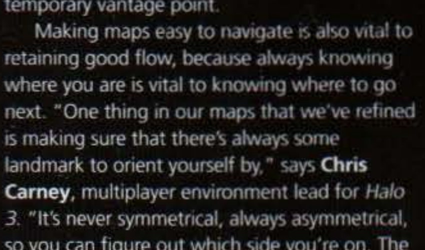
attention to details like cover, making sure that the environment doesn't snag players, and adding standout features like a jump pad that lofts them into the air and lends a new temporary vantage point.

Making maps easy to navigate is also vital to retaining good flow, because always knowing where you are is vital to knowing where to go next. "One thing in our maps that we've refined is making sure that there's always some landmark to orient yourself by," says **Chris Carney**, multiplayer environment lead for *Halo 3*. "It's never symmetrical, always asymmetrical, so you can figure out which side you're on. The fan on *Halo 2*'s Zanzibar is a great example of that." Another method is the path that leads to the opposing bases across the grassy expanse of *Halo*'s Blood Gulch. Similarly, Johnston's Dust 2 features a stone road, which loops through each main area. "Without the road, Dust starts to resemble a maze," he says, explaining that the effect is compounded with his use of arches, which split the action into specific zones.

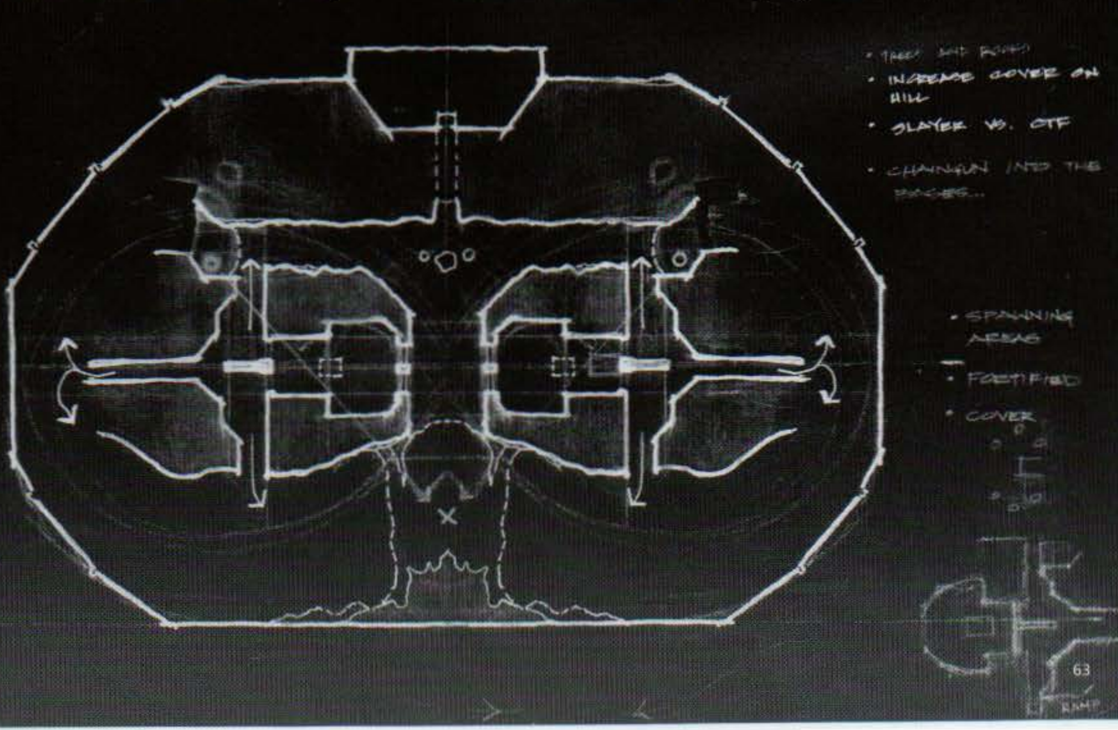
Another technique is to make a space that's easy for players to conceptualise, and therefore easier for new players to approach. "We try to make the map simple in some ways, so it's easy to build a mental map of the space," continues Carney. "Narrows in *Halo 3* is a bridge, and Sandtrap is a big long spine of ruins in a desert, so even after just running around it a couple of times you just get it. Some people might say they're not complex enough, but I think there's complexity in the cover and how you use the space once you engage in combat, not in mazes in the level itself."

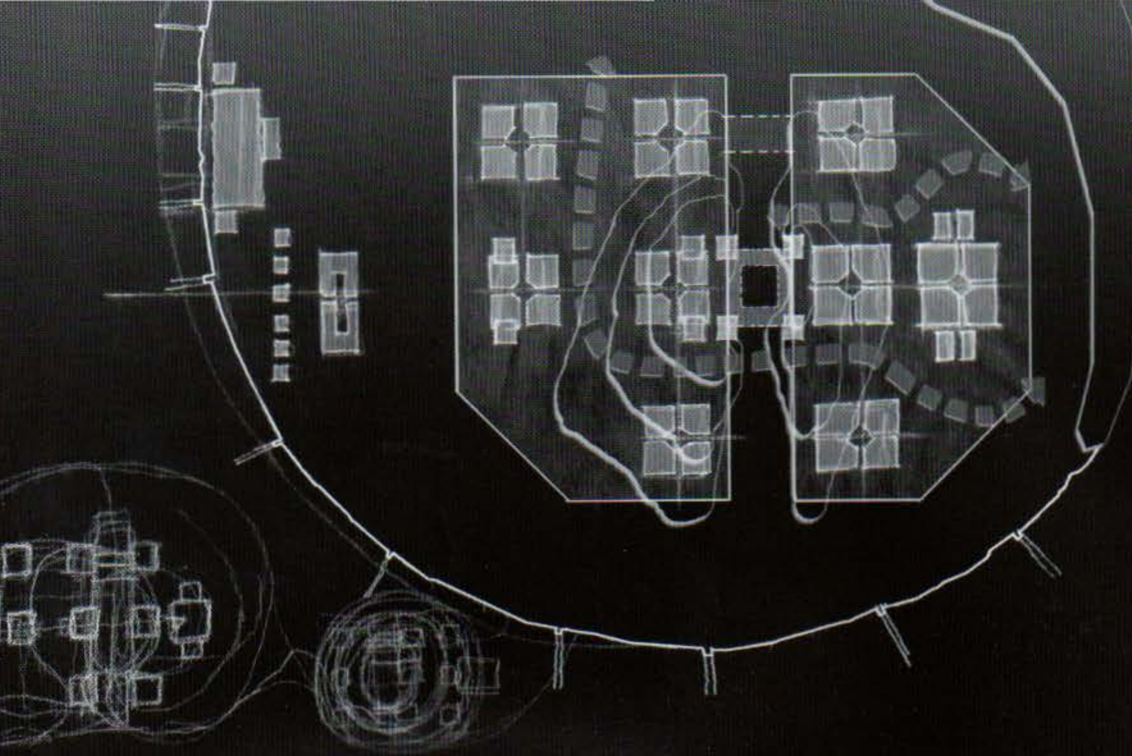
On top of that, areas can be made distinct by using contrasting colours, and when that doesn't work, there's always recourse to overt signage. As such, a map's theme – its visual style and setting – is important in helping to direct players. Signage and colour coding of areas is used extensively in *Team Fortress 2*'s 2 Fort, which features two explicitly visually different bases, a reddish farm and a bluish industrial facility, which face each other over a central river. Over the top of this, Valve has placed a fiction about each side being a cover for a Dr Strangelove-style military base located beneath it, with literal signs pointing the way. Valve calls the style it employs here 'spytech', using glossy 1960s gadgets, which contrasts with the rustic and industrial identity of above ground and tells a story about clandestine skulduggery and conflict that fits with the game design. "We use the consistency of the world's story as a tool to help players understand where they are and what they should expect," explains Lane.

The theme is something that Bungie thinks about very early in the process of developing a new map – after the basic idea has been formulated. "We'll think whether it's going to be



The first sketch plan of *Halo 3*'s Isolation's underground passage system and bases (right) shows that few changes were made to its form upon its realisation in the game









Team Fortress 2's bases show off its 'spytech' theme, including a Cold War-style control room in 2 Fort (top) and a concept drawing of the halls that lead to it (above). Right: a wireframe render of Well shows its geometric complexity to good effect



Sandtrap seems huge when played on, but can be broken down to being composed of a simple spine of buildings, large enough to provide cover for the map's vehicles

human, Forerunner, Covenant. And then we think about where it fits into these – is there anywhere in singleplayer we can set it? It helps to ground the map in the fiction, and that a lot of wonderful things come out of that," says Carney. For Carney and Green, being true to *Halo*'s fiction is important, even though the game itself actually boils down to the rather more abstract notions of scoring and respawning. "You want the player to have a cool experience; even if they get their ass kicked they can say: 'Wow, that cool space church was bizarre – I want to run around that some more and understand it'," continues Carney. "It also allows us to expand our universe a little in ways we don't have to completely rationalise, and as artists, to make stuff that's consistent with our universe from the moment you put the game disc in."

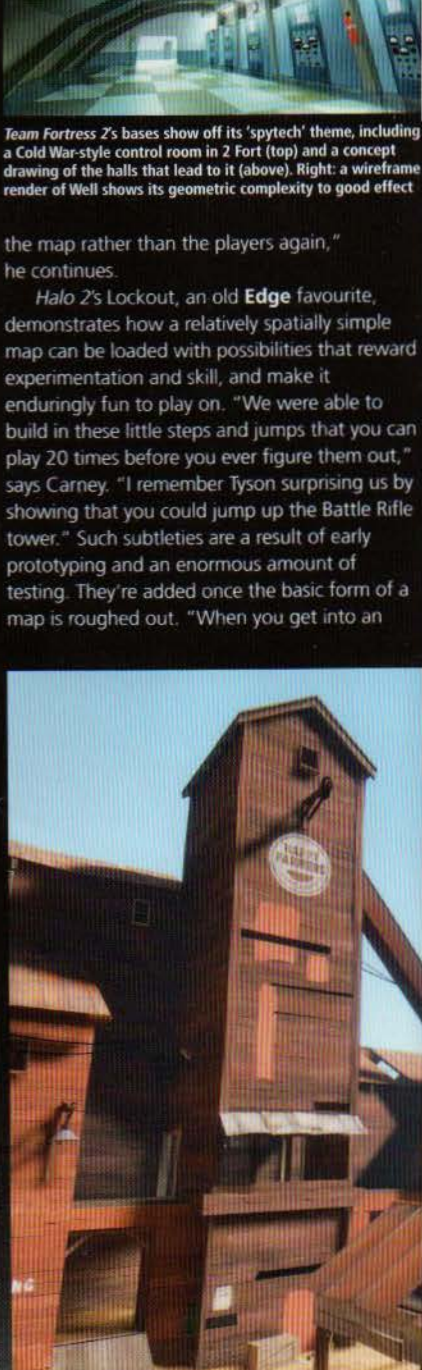
Indeed, the fiction can sometimes influence the form of the map. *Halo 3*'s The Pit was originally meant to be a Forerunner factory space, but when Green's team saw the work being done on the human base seen in the singleplayer mode they were inspired to convert the map into a human training hangar. "A lot of people got excited about that and it almost started building itself," says Carney. "We don't try to weave maps into the fiction as much as make sure they don't violate the fiction," adds Green. "Our first responsibility and priority is to make sure it's good to play on."

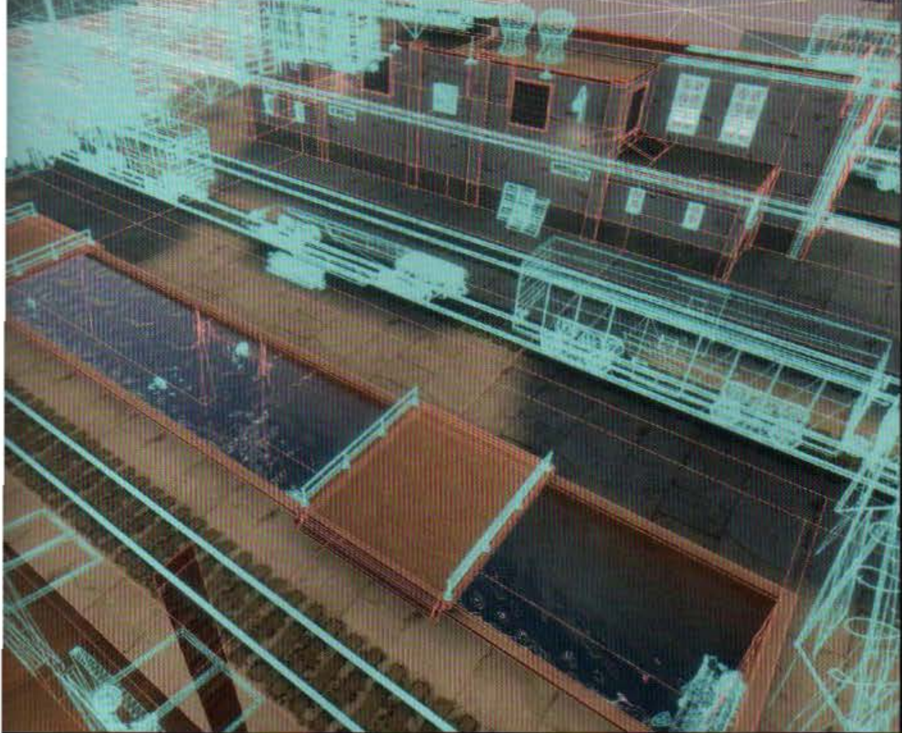
The very best maps retain incredible lasting appeal, with some players using them hundreds, if not thousands, of times. And the simplicity of Dust 2 demonstrates that complexity isn't the answer to providing it. "The primary way to increase the lifetime of a map is to provide space for players to invent their own strategies over time," says *TF2*'s Lane. "Providing enough spatial possibilities allows players to work together and develop new strategies within the community as time goes on. Designs that have the most longevity do not rely on too many gimmicks." Naturally, Johnston agrees: "You encourage longevity by being bland, mostly! Dust is one of the simplest multiplayer maps ever made, and has been static for years and years now. It really puts the focus on the players, which are the only elements of the game that change every match." He believes that complex maps can impose certain styles of play, thereby giving players less room to be creative. "It gets boring because everyone is just adopting the only strategy that works. They end up fighting the map rather than the players again," he continues.



An early prototype for *Team Fortress 2*'s 2 Fort shows how the basic play form is developed with visual embellishments, some of which, such as the covered bridge, transform the way it plays

Halo 2's Lockout, an old **Edge** favourite, demonstrates how a relatively spatially simple map can be loaded with possibilities that reward experimentation and skill, and make it enduringly fun to play on. "We were able to build in these little steps and jumps that you can play 20 times before you ever figure them out," says Carney. "I remember Tyson surprising us by showing that you could jump up the Battle Rifle tower." Such subtleties are a result of early prototyping and an enormous amount of testing. They're added once the basic form of a map is roughed out. "When you get into an





environment and start running around, you might notice that, hey, if that thing was five feet closer, you could put in a really cool dangerous jump that certain people would pick up on their 50th go and completely change the way the game works," says Green.

So, where next? Beyond stretching to support new game designs and game types, maps have functionally remained much the same. Aesthetics have become more and more important, rushing to fulfil player expectations for spectacle, but this can have heavy implications for the designers. "A breathtaking building that's completely insignificant is a waste of artist time and can lead to player confusion

"THE FUN AND PLAYABILITY OF A MAP MUST ALWAYS RULE OVER VISUALS, AND THAT MIGHT BE HARDER IN THE FUTURE"

because you have to focus the player's eyes to where the action is," says Johnston. And the time required for finishing touches can be costly. "I think the fun and playability of a map must always rule over visuals and that might be harder in the future as aesthetics seem to be everyone's focus," says Carney.

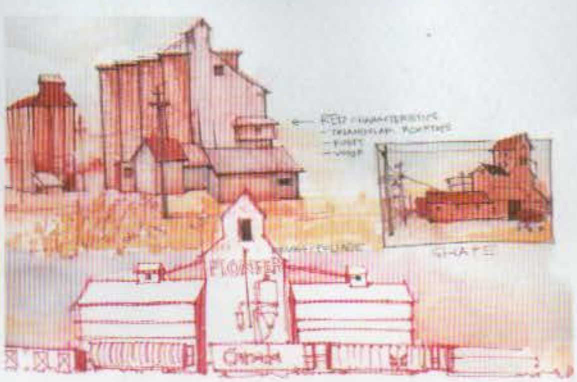
For Johnston, one way he can see multiplayer maps possibly changing is in becoming more dynamic: "The level you start playing in the evening might look very different a couple of hours later." Technical and design issues still surround such ideas. "Highly dynamic elements are expensive performance-wise and can cause difficulty with networking and physics. On the design side, communicating events to all the players in the game is also much more difficult to manage in multiplayer than in a singleplayer game," says *TF2*'s Lane. But as bandwidth and processing power increase, it's easy to imagine that such problems will abate.

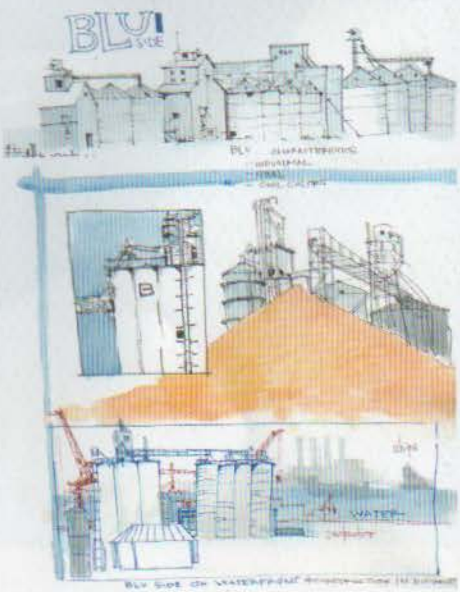
"Or perhaps players will be able to generate in front of their eyes maps to their exact specifications by pressing a few buttons?" ponders Johnston. And with Forge, or *Crysis*' new suite of easy-to-use map design tools, it doesn't seem quite so far-fetched a notion. Perhaps the future is indeed something malleable and personal, something more in tune with the modding culture in which the likes of Dust 2 were developed. But nascent designers will need to remember that the player always comes first. "Provided the player always knows what to do or try next, they'll want to keep playing," concludes Johnstone.

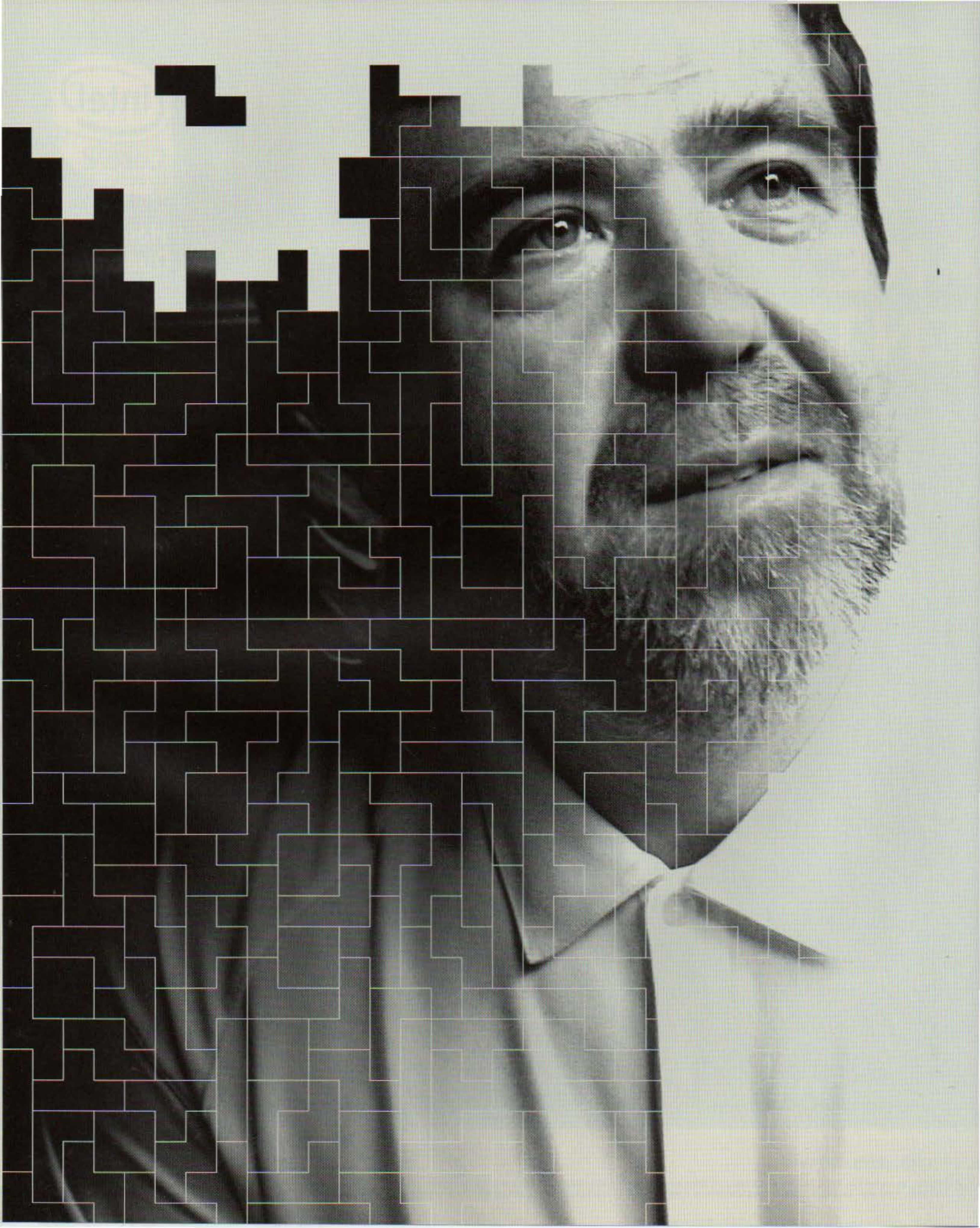


SETTING STYLES

These concept drawings for *Team Fortress 2*'s 2 Fort emphasise the nuanced aesthetic changes Valve made on updating the map from its original form in *Team Fortress Classic*. There, it had a vaguely realistic military-industrial theme that matched its contemporaries' styles. Dust is of a similar age, and its Middle Eastern theme contrasted with the other maps that came out of the modding community at the time, a factor that Johnston believes gave it important early attention in a competitive scene. But he acknowledges that it wouldn't get a second look now, with designers paying greater attention to maps' settings.







Puzzle quest

Alexey Pajitnov, the inventor of Tetris, on the mysticism of puzzles, and 27 kilobytes that changed the world

Nottingham town centre, on a dreary and deserted Sunday morning: it seems a strange time and place to be meeting one of the most revered figures in game design history. But the café is snug, and **Alexey Pajitnov**, with his clipped beard, neat trainers and buttoned-up polo shirt, seems more like a favourite physics teacher than a genius, or a star.

Pajitnov is in Nottingham to appear at the GameCity festival, and to promote nothing in particular. Later in the day he'll attend a screening of Tetris: From Russia With Love, the 2004 BBC documentary focusing on his creation of the universally popular puzzle game while at the academic Moscow Computer Centre, and the tortuous wrangling over it between communist Russia and the corporate west. He'll sit through it all, reminding himself of events, chuckling to see his friends on the screen, and wincing at his adorably thick Russian accent (seemingly undiluted by more than a decade living in Seattle).

He'll happily discuss *Tetris* at length over two question-and-answer sessions, poring over the details of 1,600 lines of code – 27 kilobytes, once compiled – that he wrote 22 years ago. And he'll do it all with humour, clarity, and a mixture of modesty and very matter-of-fact pride. Pajitnov may present himself as a normal nerd who stumbled on a great idea by accident, but he's no more likely to play down its brilliance than he is to claim he has repeated it, or ever will.

However, his unassuming profile belies a wealth of experience. Pajitnov has now spent the best part of two decades consulting on and designing puzzle games, including countless reimaginings of *Tetris*, and at least one other bona fide classic – the mesmerising *Hexic*, created for the casual gaming division of sometime paymaster Microsoft. He's played every puzzle game you can mention (as well as lots of *Catan* and *World Of WarCraft*). There can be no better brains to pick on this most taken-for-granted of game genres.

What drew you to start programming puzzles on computers?

Well, I just liked to do it! The Computer Centre was one of the small number of open organisations [in the USSR] which dealt with computers. Other organisations from abroad often sent us new hardware to try. We had lots of different, very strange machines and microprocessors. One of my jobs was to kind of test this stuff – see what it was about, how we could use it. The best way to deal with a new computer is to try to write a small program and see how it works. A game was a very good example. And puzzles are some of the easiest things to program.

Did you have a natural interest in puzzles yourself?

Oh, yes. From my schoolboy years I was always doing all kinds of riddles and puzzles – that's why I chose the career of a computer scientist.

Why do you think people enjoy puzzles?

Well, not everybody likes them. Usually it's sharp-minded

people who like to be challenged all the time. In old puzzles, it was even a kind of mystic thing… In the 17th or 18th centuries, the puzzle was associated with a walk to a secret door, a mystery. I think that this mystic element really is there, because when you solve the puzzle it looks so easy, so obvious, and you can't understand why you didn't see it immediately. It means you were charmed.

How do you think puzzles change when you put them on computers?
Computers improve every intellectual activity. You have unlimited features to add, to change. You can turn puzzles into games. According to public opinion, puzzles are dull and take too long to solve, but computers really increase the speed and dynamise them. They become faster, maybe not as deep as a puzzle on paper or with pieces, but certainly more colourful, dynamic and fun.

And with a game like *Tetris* you can introduce time pressure with the falling pieces.
Yes, in this respect, well… *Tetris* is not a pure puzzle game. It has a very strong arcade element. Usually people don't put this time pressure on puzzles in terms of the rules, though. Sometimes they put a timer, but usually it's an option. Pure puzzles require some time to think.

Hexic doesn't feature time pressure, at least not in its main mode. Would you say that makes it more of a pure puzzle game than _Tetris_?
Well, formally maybe yes, but not really. *Hexic* is a more arcadey game too, because it has too much of a random element in it. A classical puzzle is something with the full information, which is set up once. But those games are random, so that you have variety in the task every time, and you don't know the configuration. That gives great variety and interest to the game, but at the same time it doesn't allow you to make the puzzle really deep and complicated. Realtime is one element that 'washes out' puzzles, and the other one is this randomness.

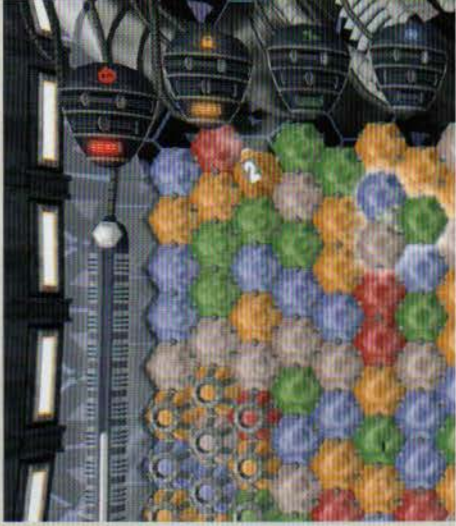
What do you think motivates a _Tetris_ player, psychologically speaking?
Well, it's a very teasing game, you know? Every moment you feel you could do a little bit better, and lower this garbage by one line. And you do it and you discover that you're higher than before. Also you have a very nice feeling when you fit pieces together, and it comes in a good rhythm.

On that basic level, do you think it works in a similar way psychologically to other genres of game? Shooters, for example.
In some respects. But usually they plan some other emotional picture. They try to increase the challenge, so it starts easy, then you have the first challenge, then you have a stable period, then you increase the challenge again, and then you have a boss, which is the catharsis of this kind of mini-drama. And somehow, intuitively, many game designers discover this dynamic and reproduce it. But *Tetris* doesn't have this overall picture. It just happens to be repeatable stuff with a certain rhythm.

"Sometimes people say to me: 'Oh, I wasted so much time playing your game'. I ask: 'Was it a good time?' They say: 'Sure!' Well, it's not wasted, then"

As you said, you created _Tetris_ in a spirit of experimentation…
Well, *Tetris* in particular I did just because I liked to program those games. Other games I did for some experimental reason or other, but *Tetris* was a pure exercise.

But you created it without thinking commercially. Is that part of the reason it's so simple, so universal?
No, I didn't think commercially, that's for sure. All of



***Hexic 2* introduces a twoplayer mode to the game. Versions of *Tetris* have of course featured many multiplayer modes over its long life, but Pajitnov is turning to his attention to the problems of multiplayer design from the ground up for the first time**

my games in that period were created just for fun. But you know, what does commercial mean? I never work on games just for commercial reasons… Actually, that is not true. Sometimes I'm hired to do a game for some specific goal, to go with a new piece of equipment or because they want me in the game for the advertising. But that's the only way to make a truly commercial game – the requirement for the game to be fun is not very high, and it has another purpose.

But if you work on a game, whether you do it for yourself or you do it as a job, you want people to like it, otherwise it makes no sense. You don't think about money but about the pleasure you give to people. Commercial is the wrong term. You want to give people pleasure – that's the only goal.

Are there any other puzzle games that you particularly admire?
Oh, yes. In fact I admire almost all of them. In the early days, there was *Lode Runner*. I consider it a real puzzle game. That was my favourite for many, many years. It's such a good combination of dynamic stuff, the fingerwork, and real planning and puzzle-solving. Every level was a real puzzle with its own mechanics, its own dynamics, its own kind of solution. At the same time, it was an arcade game to play. This combination was done absolutely right. I can't imagine any other game with such inventive and unusual design.

Later on, I liked the games published by PopCap and GameHouse – those guys know how to do puzzle games. And for a very long time I really admired *Pipe Dream* [originally known as *Pipe Mania*]. That's the other absolutely classic, classic game. It will never die.

Most successful puzzle games are usually completely abstract in their presentation…
Yes, and that's why they're not so annoying for many people. People's tastes are so different. And when you bring some kind of particular style, you realise

Square peg, round hole

It's typical of Pajitnov's confidently self-effacing style that he'll happily confess to working on a terrible game, and proclaim how much he enjoyed it in the same breath. The culprit? The N64's utterly confounding wraparound _Tetris_ spinoff, _Tetrisphere_ (below). "This was an awful game by Nintendo," laughs Pajitnov. "It was so complicated. But I really enjoyed working on it. It's a really, really hardcore game – it wasn't successful at all. The team I worked with was very hardcore and wanted to make a really difficult game, so they did. Nobody could really realise how to play this game. It was kind of a catastrophe."





that although you're making your game beautiful or interesting, you definitely cut out a big part of the audience. Because they just hate this Egyptian stuff, you know? They just don't like it. Scarabs and pyramids and hieroglyphics and whatever. But when it's abstract, nobody gets annoyed.

Has it sometimes been difficult living under the shadow of *Tetris* for the last 20 years?
Well, I got used to it, and it's a good game. I'm really pleased when people thank me for the pleasure they got from it. Sometimes people say: 'Oh, I wasted so much time playing your game'. I ask: 'Was it a good time?' They say: 'Sure!' Well, it's not wasted, then.

What are you particularly proud of in *Tetris*, *Hexic* and your other games?
Well, *Tetris* is a good game that was born as is from the very beginning. So I can't say that I'm specifically proud of some part of it, because it just comes in one piece.

As far as *Hexic* is concerned, that game was kind of constructed, I had certain goals when I did it. My main goal was to create a game for a very long play time. Usually it's not a problem when you allow yourself to create a complicated, hard game. But I wasn't allowed to produce a complicated game – I worked in the casual game department, you know? So I was very proud of this neatness of the game; people spend unbelievably long hours on *Hexic*, but the game is really simple from the very beginning, while it still has enough depth to keep people for 40 hours or more.

What are you working on at the moment?
I'm planning to start a twoplayer game with a small group I have in St Petersburg now. We are in the very early stages, discussing basic stuff we want to do. We still need to convince one of the members to do a twoplayer game because he really hates them!

Why do you want to make a twoplayer game?
I think it's hot stuff now. I think in the next five or six years it will be the main thing in casual games, because games have always been a social activity, competition between people. Unfortunately all the network stuff has been a pain in the neck – you need to connect, you need to wait, take account of the protocol... Forget it. People have just 15 seconds of confidence in your product – you can't do it. Now it finally becomes possible to put a twoplayer activity in a very natural environment, although there are still some problems – how to organise lobbies, how to have people waiting, how to compensate one player if the other one drops out.

Is it a very different design challenge compared to creating a singleplayer puzzle game?
It's not completely different, but there are some specific problems: who starts, how to avoid symmetrical strategies, how to avoid the situation when the game is always a draw, how to avoid big luck for one player and lack of luck for the other. They are very known; all of them are solvable.

The nature of the puzzle game market is that you work mostly on casual games. Would you like a chance to create a difficult game for more serious players?
I don't think that makes sense. I don't understand why you'd do this. For real fans who love to play something very complicated, they can find something! It is important to get the other people involved, to tease their brains. That's why I never dream about doing really complicated stuff. Well, I did do some puzzles at Microsoft, when I worked there – we had a kind of festival, called Puzzle Hunt. I participated a couple of times – I'm not particularly great at it – and one year I participated in the creation of those puzzles. It's hard because it should be original and really, really challenging. That's the only time I've created really hard puzzles.

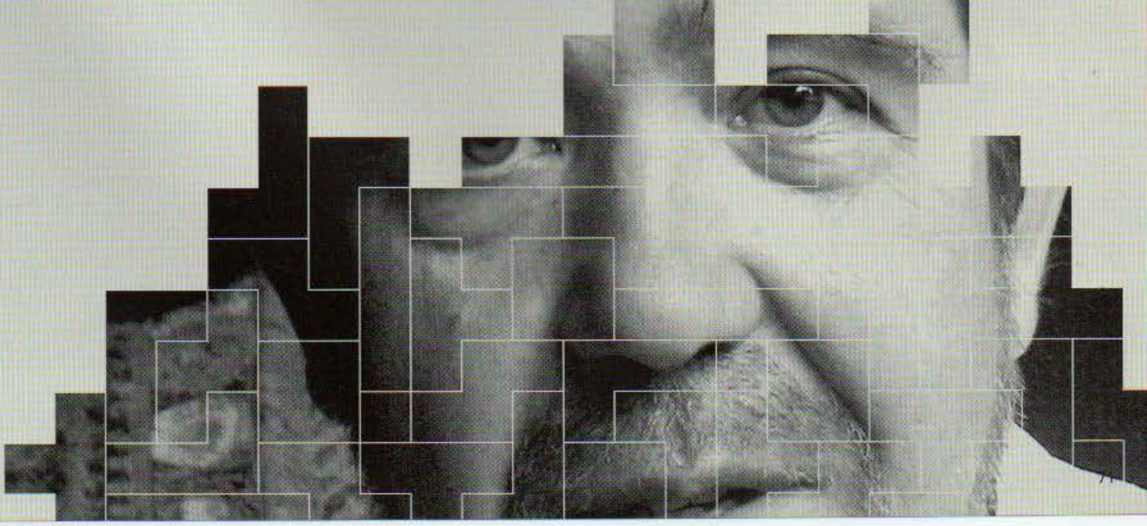
But, you know, you don't need to be really smart to create really hard puzzles – it's not correlated. You need to be really good to create easy puzzles!

Pajitnov screws up and twinkles his eyes, and laughs at his cheeky immodesty, making light of it. But really, he's deadly serious – and he's right. It takes bravery and vision to strip all the complexity and structure out of a hard puzzle until it's almost insultingly simple, and then rebuild it into a game without end. Yet that is exactly what Pajitnov did to create *Tetris*; that is exactly what turned an intellectual pursuit into a global pastime. Seldom has less meant so much more.

Bejeweled and bewildered

If one game has come close to *Tetris'* phenomenal popularity and broad appeal, it's PopCap's *Bejeweled*. But Pajitnov has extremely mixed feelings about it. "I was really angry with the guys who made *Bejeweled*," he says at one of his GameCity Q&A sessions. "They had a wonderful idea, a very good concept for the game, and then realised it really badly. I'd have liked to talk to them and tell them what to do with it, but it was already out – and very popular, because the concept and original setup of the game was really, really great. They didn't tune it right, because no matter how good a player you are, your score is always about the same. You don't have any feeling of your own progress. So basically I decided to design a game similar to *Bejeweled* but the way it's supposed to be. And that's *Hexic*."





Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Zelda: Phantom Hourglass



It's back to cel-shaded seas and one of the most coherent uses of the DS yet. There's something special about finding rupees at the very point you'd marked on the map.
DS, NINTENDO

The Orange Box



Whether revisiting City 17, embarking on new adventures in the White Forest, caning *Portal* or berating a lack of team skills in *Team Fortress 2*: HUGE SUCCESS.
360, PC, VALVE/EA

God Of War



Even as *Beowulf* and *Conan*, and its own sequels, snap at its heels, the original's spectacle and pace, detail and scope, are still epic. Kratos doesn't muck about, does he?
PS2, SCEE

Dramatic tension

Should we call for the death of the cutscene?



Assassin's Creed's choice to give players token control during cutscenes isn't entirely successful. It's better in the more action-oriented scenes, with Altair jostling for position in the crowd, because it emphasises his part in the story

There are a lot of cutscenes in *Assassin's Creed*. Handling two overlaid stories – that of 12th-century Altaïr and 21st-century Desmond, as well as those of its nine targets – it has a lot of narrative to get through. Ubisoft Montreal's solution is to give you nominal control over Desmond and Altaïr during each cutscene. The problem is they neither have traditional cutscenes' dramatic framing nor *Half-Life 2*'s 'the story's here if you want it' freedom.

It exposes a wide discomfort videogames designers have about cutscenes. Indeed, two of our columnists make reference to it in this issue. As Randy Smith says: 'If it's not interactive, it's not a videogame'. He believes that cutscenes are substitutes for things designers don't yet know how to represent using interactive means.

It's easy to hate a game that has long sections in which you can't do anything other than clear dialogue with the X button. And talking of *Metal Gear Solid*, the change in continuity between game and cutscene can be jarring: even in *MGS4* soldiers will leap off a truck and patrol with motion-captured realism, but snap into curiously robotic behaviour when play resumes. Yet getting to see one of *Halo 3*'s spaced-out and well-directed scenes after overcoming a difficult section offers a welcome change of pace and the reward of audiovisual spectacle. And as vibrant as its representation of California is, how much would *San Andreas* lose if it didn't have its well-scripted and voiced cutscenes to reinforce its characters so well?

But, more importantly, to what extent is it interaction's job to tell stories? Is it too much to expect a game's design to offer absorbing gameplay as well as communicate character motivations and narrative arcs? Might an *Assassin's Creed* player crumble under the need to learn a conversation system as well as the arts of parkour and combat? Some of the most successful attempts to tell stories through interaction are those, like the tapes in *BioShock*, which restrict it to allowing players to choose whether they experience it or not.

Rather than calling for their eradication, perhaps we should instead call for better cutscenes. If they're well-scripted, directed, voiced – and sensitively coupled with gameplay – perhaps the only interaction we need is the opportunity to skip them.





Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



SUPER MARIO GALAXY

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E180





The fire flower makes its first appearance in 3D – but for a limited time only (above). This boss (below) is defeated by swinging exploding boos around by their tongues





Super Mario Galaxy is impossible. Don't get the wrong idea – it's not a particularly difficult game, although it does have its moments. What we mean is, it obeys no rules, contradicts everything you know, and has no right to exist.

It turns 3D into 2D, and 2D into 3D. It takes complex spatial ideas and makes them simple and instinctive; it takes the most basic, most familiar acts in gaming and makes them strange, finger-twisting and fresh. It resurrects the pure platform game in a universe where it's hard to fall off things. It rewrites its own rules in almost every level, sometimes more than once. *Super Mario Galaxy* rejoices in turning the world upside down.

> It's an identical feeling to steering Mario's first steps in 3D over a decade ago. Only this time, that feeling never goes away

It really ought to feel more familiar than it does. Mario's basic controls work almost exactly as they did in *Super Mario 64*: a supple range of clumsily exuberant acrobatics, distilled to the manipulation of one stick and two buttons. Exactly as last year's *New Super Mario Bros* did for Mario's 2D incarnation, it serves as a reminder of how his peerless controls have been widely imitated, but never successfully copied. The timing is slightly more forgiving, and the sense of inertia is mildly restrained (in normal gravitational conditions – which are rare enough). But the elastic, chaotic, joyfully expressive freedom is as it ever was.

So far, so reassuring. But after a clunky and cutscene-ridden intro has laid out a needless backstory for *Super Mario Galaxy*'s sheer nonsense, the game dumps you on its first little spherical planetoid. As you hare around, you run down its flank, and along its bottom; you plunge through a pipe and pop out on the other side. Left becomes right and down becomes up in the blink of an eye.

Confusion and disorientation slowly melt into surprise and delight; your brain baulks at the message from your eyes, but your fingers know, instinctively, that Mario will just go where you point him. It's an identical feeling to steering Mario's first steps in 3D over a decade ago; the hesitant thrill of understanding that what was absolute has become a matter of perspective. Only this time, that feeling never goes away.

Since a fourth dimension of space doesn't exist, Nintendo has found it necessary to invent one. It has wrapped *Mario 64*'s bas-reliefs around spheres, cylinders and lozenges. There are planets with prongs, planets in the shape of a mushroom or of Yoshi's head, planets made of interlocking beams, planets that double back on themselves, planets that are just globes of water you can swim through. The ground



The Mushroom Kingdom has never seemed so pedestrian, but putting Mario to the test in an earthbound intro, before *Galaxy* starts playing with your perceptions, was a good idea











Galaxy's underwater battles can be tricksy, but are helped by the transformation of shells into a combination of aqua scooters and torpedoes (above). Boss stages featuring Bowser (below) strongly recall those in *Super Mario 64*, all the way down to the music, and comprise similarly intense platforming with an even better brawl at the end of it all





Even the standard interactions like swinging on a rope are realised with the impeccable physics and sheer impetuous glee the *Mario* games have been providing us with for decades

keeps shifting, your faith keeps being challenged, the sense of amused wonder at each rewiring of your brain never fades.

Incredibly, these mind-bending spatial concepts – so much more complex and elusive than anything seen in thirdperson gaming to date – are displayed by a camera that's nothing short of perfect. Nintendo has stepped back from user control and let its own code and careful direction do the talking. There are larger, more traditionally designed flat planets too – a welcome change of pace, for the most part, though one ice world veers dangerously close to cliché – and here basic rotation of the camera is allowed. It speaks volumes that you will very rarely think to touch it.

Thanks to its host platform, *Super Mario Galaxy* has another perspective twist in store. Its use of the Remote is more subtle, but more pervasive, than the vigorous literalism of *Twilight Princess*. Shaking it for a spin attack, or to activate the star gates that send you soaring ecstatically between planets, gives you that now-familiar tactile buzz. But as a pointer, it does so much more. It lets you reach into the screen, collecting and shooting the star bits that litter the universe, grabbing on to tractor beams, steering bubbles through mazes, twanging Mario and Toad out of catapults. It lets you play the game in two ways and two places at once, and breaks a hitherto unseen barrier between the player and the action. That you can both be Mario and help him is another of *Galaxy*'s initially strange dislocations, but it comes to feel so comfortable that losing this godlike power is like losing an arm.

Galaxy's spirit of wild invention could finish there and you would hardly feel short-changed. The first few galaxies you visit lay out the game's extraordinary ideas so

Continued

The Little Princess



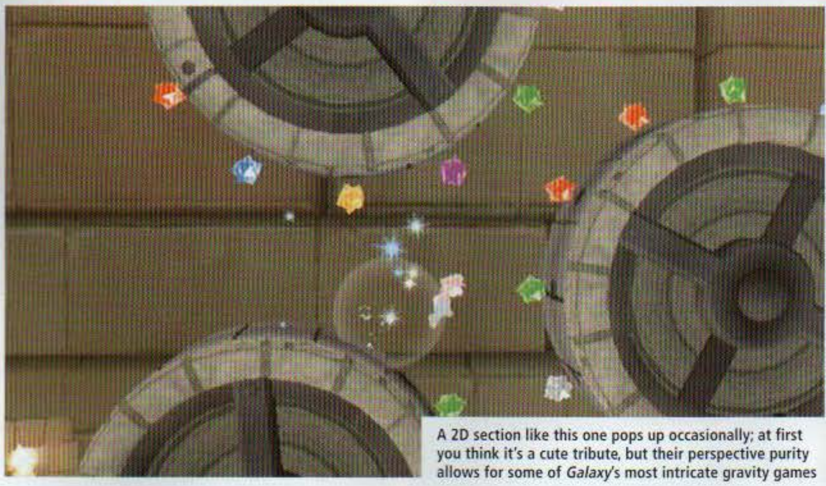
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's classic children's book The Little Prince, with its tiny asteroids, is a clear visual inspiration for *Super Mario Galaxy*. But its influence doesn't stop there. As Mario's adventure progresses, new chapters of a storybook are revealed – a gorgeously illustrated and delicately told tale of how Rosalina came to be mother to the stars. It's more sentimental than philosophical, but it has much of The Little Prince's whimsical, bittersweet tone, and a heart-breaking twist that will bring a lump to all but the most cynical players' throats. *Sunshine* proved that storytelling and Mario make for uncomfortable bedfellows, but this powerfully affecting extra – existing in a parallel universe, and different medium, to the game itself – is one of the best stories in games this year.





The star ball (above) is controlled by holding the Wii Remote upright and tilting it gently; and rather marvellously, the music speeds up and slows down with your motion. Other sections find you collecting strings of quavers, playing out classic *Mario* tunes note by note





A 2D section like this one pops up occasionally; at first you think it's a cute tribute, but their perspective purity allows for some of *Galaxy*'s most intricate gravity games

The comet's tale



Each of the main galaxies has three star challenges – one usually a boss (the sheer number of inventive bosses in *Galaxy* is remarkable in itself). The three extra stars are usually one hidden star, one Luigi rescue – you'll need to identify his whereabouts from a photograph, then figure out to how to get there – and one 'trickster comet'. These comets rove around the galaxies at random and herald one of four special challenges: speedy (a race against time), cosmic (a race against Cosmic Mario – a reprise of *Sunshine*'s impostor), fast foe (enemies move much faster), and daredevil (Mario has no health and will die instantly if touched). The level sections are picked very carefully to fit, but can still be rather frustrating, and will doubtless end up as the last few stars to fall for most players.

cogently, develop them with such easy confidence, that you can see every consequence of these basic principles being stretched out for the rest of the game with the thorough professionalism Nintendo has become known for. But *Mario* games didn't used to be like that; Nintendo didn't used to do that. And *Galaxy* doesn't go that way.

The ideas, jokes, twists, surprises, new games, rules and interactions simply never stop coming. In fact, they intensify into a ceaseless torrent of absurd details and insane conceptual leaps. 'Matter-splatter' stages reduce your grip on reality to shifting spotlights of solid matter in an ocean of void. Gravity traps and switches turn the most basic 2D and 3D *Galaxy* stages into head-spinning puzzles. Unexpected power-ups appear, from the ancient fire-flower to a skating ice-Mario and the hilariously slapstick spring. Like the well-publicised bee and boo suits, these are disposable toys rather than deep new mechanics in their own right, but frankly, after FLUDD, a concentration on Mario's native abilities is welcome.

As hard as it can be to believe, it's in its second half that *Galaxy* takes flight and shoots for the stars. *Super Mario Sunshine* lost sight of it, partly, but Mario has always been about creating a space where games can leave the real world behind, and explore their limitless potential for realising the surreal and impossible. That has never been more true than it is of *Super Mario Galaxy*. It's an overused phrase, but if this isn't a riot of the imagination, then nothing is.

Structurally, it's a little more conventional – 120 stars, split into six areas comprising several galaxies each, with the 'final' boss coming halfway through, is an entirely familiar arrangement. So is the now-unfashionable hub world, a spacefaring observatory belonging to the enigmatic Princess Rosalina and her impossibly cute tribe of star-people, the Lumas. When you discover that major galaxies consist of only three star stages each, and that many of these are spun out with hidden stars, Luigi rescues and trickster comets (see 'The comet's tale'), you begin to fear that *Galaxy*'s content is spread a little thin.

The reverse is true. Every inch of *Galaxy*'s galaxies is so dense, so rich, that a little recycling has to be excused. After all, it's what has afforded Nintendo's designers time to explore a vast number of one-off ideas in special galaxies scattered all around the game. These range from delightful novelties exploring diverse control systems – ray-surfing and ball-balancing and more – to focused platforming challenges of breathtaking intensity and scale, like the unforgettable Buoy Base Tower.

Galaxy is an extremely beautiful game; vivid colours edged in starlight, every surface finished with a candied sheen you can almost taste

That's before you even step beyond the design to consider the impeccable audiovisual polish. Excepting one or two drab areas, *Galaxy* is an extremely beautiful game; vivid colours edged in starlight, every surface finished with a candied sheen you can almost taste. Its soundtrack is simply



The huge number of boss encounters in *Galaxy* is remarkable, but not half as remarkable as the incredibly high and consistent standard of their design. Almost all are imaginative, tense, funny, spectacular and surprising





A special stage in which you race a ray along a Möbius strip of water suspended in the sky by twisting the Remote is fun, but the best of these stages use the more common elements of the game, such as the beam stars







one of the all-time greats, mixing electro breakdowns of *Mario* tunes past with thrilling, lyrical orchestral pieces and outlandish effects.

It's all too much to take in; it's more than you thought possible. Since the end of the N64 era, as Nintendo has explored new pastures and methodically tended old ones, it's been easy to forget the times when every major release from the company felt like this. It's a bravura piece of design that pulls off stunts no one else has even thought of, and makes it look easy. But its greatest surprise is a very simple one.

Super Mario Galaxy is a platform game, pure and simple. More so than *Mario 64* is; more so than any truly 3D videogame ever made. For all its countless diversions and bizarre ideas, it keeps coming back to running, bouncing, scaling, exploring, teetering on the brink, taking your heart in your mouth and jumping off the edge of the world. For others, space is the final frontier, the furthest you can go; for Mario, it's just like coming home. **[10]**



Reducing Mario's hit points to three was a brilliantly judged move, preserving a keen edge of danger in the game that's well balanced with the sensible checkpoint placement. Equally clever was rewarding bop and spin attacks with coins (health, score) and star bits (currency) respectively, varying tactics and risking reward



UNCHARTED: DRAKE'S FORTUNE

FORMAT: PS3 PRICE: £50
RELEASE: DECEMBER 7 PUBLISHER: SCEE
DEVELOPER: NAUGHTY DOG PREVIOUSLY IN: E179, E182



You can frequently tell when a gun battle is on the cards, thanks to the tendency of the masonry to form conveniently tactical cover. It's needed, though, because the mercenaries nearly always attack in numbers from more than one position







The control possibilities within close combat aren't extensive, but there are a good number of animations that disable enemies in athletic and occasionally thumping ways. And some scissor-kicking

If you expect *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* to begin with a cutscene, you'd be right. If you expect to negotiate beautiful environments and fight mercenaries, shoot explosive barrels and scale ruins, you'd be right. In fact, you'd be right with almost any informed prediction about *Uncharted*'s content. But the fact that you're right doesn't begin to explain why, despite everything about it being a little predictable, *Uncharted* manages to get it right.

The games it takes as its inspirations are the best examples of their type – the shooting from *Gears Of War* and *Resident Evil 4*, the adventuring from *Tomb Raider* and *Prince Of Persia*. *Uncharted* is brazen in its borrowings, but it is also selective and never ambitious to excess: the whole experience is carefully crafted and perhaps its greatest achievement is in its pacing, which alternates between combat and exploration (and occasionally a vehicle section) with a real consideration for the player. It is one of the great lessons it learns from *Resident Evil 4* and, although *Uncharted* never quite manages to reach that level of breathless excitement, it makes the basic core of the game replayable rather than repetitious.

> There's a reasonable selection of weapons, all with their own quirks, but the real pleasure is to be found in the Indiana Jones close combat

The combat exemplifies this: at heart it is little more than a very good example of the cover/fire school of gameplay, perhaps not quite as exaggerated as that of *Gears Of War*. But it is distinguished through variation in environmental layouts such that, even though you're facing the same types of enemy for most of the game, each encounter demands something slightly different from the one before. There's a reasonable selection of weapons, all with their own quirks (although the pistol is your best friend), but the real pleasure – and the second factor that elevates *Uncharted* above the ranks of imitator – is to be found in the Indiana Jones close combat. This is incorporated into your fighting in several ways, whether as a five-punch combo to finish off a lone gunman or a flying dropkick when an enemy is blocking your hurried escape, and when used properly it's an invaluable addition to your armoury. The only disappointment lies in some problems with the cover system, with Drake occasionally refusing to respond to your urgent commands next to doors – a stumbling block within its free-flowing context.

The adventuring sections are more straightforward than the combat, alternating between the odd puzzle and many athletic sections where Drake has to clamber up,





Another 'inspiration' from *Gears Of War* comes with these wretch-like creatures, which provide some claustrophobic fear to the later stages – but at least the on-rails sections let you work out your frustrations in the open jungle











The vistas of *Uncharted* can be breathtaking at times, from rusting Nazi U-boats in the jungle to abandoned villages, and will give the right analogue stick a good workout



around, inside and out of various structures. Jumping and hanging from cracks and pillars is more reminiscent of *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time* than the *Tomb Raider* series to which *Uncharted* has been compared, and gains in spectacle what it loses in scope. However, there are some poor design decisions that simply can't be ignored: chains, for example, are occasionally used to move around the environment, and are often used as an insubstantial decoration. You'll only know which, initially at least, when you've either made it across the gap or are falling to your doom. At least *Uncharted* is generous with its restart positions.

Within these sections, the game isn't shy about moving the camera for dramatic effect during key moments. This can work brilliantly, particularly in an out-of-screen moment that nods to the original *Crash Bandicoot*, and with some of the game's more routine platform moments. If there's a criticism, it's that it isn't used completely coherently – there are only one or two big set-pieces in the game that use these tricks, and these are excellent, while there are many 'smaller' moments where quick camera changes confuse rather than help. And although it would be madness to criticise linearity in and of itself, none of the adventuring environments offer a freedom of approach towards the single destination – indeed, neither the physical nor mental puzzles will significantly slow down anyone. But apart from this *Uncharted* has a sense of spectacle in the obstacles you face, and also concentrates its narrative around these sections – making them a significantly different counterweight to the fighting.



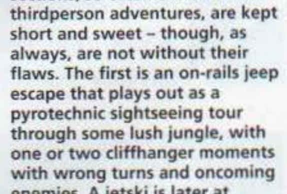


The HUD is minimal throughout, with no room for a life bar – damage turns the screen monochrome, as Drake's breathing becomes laboured and his hearing fades. If you survive, the colours spring back into vibrant life as his health recharges

The game looks beautiful, and in motion is far from the impression of shiny waxworks that screenshots may give: towering trees, vine-covered ruins and crumbling masonry create a real sense of place, and the attention to detail in even the incidental temple decorations is to be applauded. This is complemented by the story, a half-nonsensical, half-thrilling adventure plot, which manages to showcase the well-distinguished main characters as well as keep the momentum of the treasure hunt going: it's as tight and coherent a plot as seen in a game of this type, as serviceable as it is accomplished. It's this attention to detail beyond the obvious that makes up for some of the other areas where the game isn't quite as striking: Drake's animations are plentiful and authentic, for example, and at least shake the impression that you're controlling Captain Scarlet, but can't help but look slightly basic next to the new gold standard of *Assassin's Creed*.

Amid all the comparisons *Uncharted* tempts, however, one thing remains: it is a great adventure story that plays excellently. There's nothing substantially new in what it does – indeed its influences are obvious – and there are some minor problems, but through judicious pruning and reweaving Naughty Dog has crafted one of the finest action adventures to date. It's involving in its narrative, a triumph of pacing, and simply a pleasure to play. Your move, Ms Croft. **[8]**

Drive!



One of *Uncharted*'s better features is that the vehicle sections, so often the bane of thirdperson adventures, are kept short and sweet – though, as always, are not without their flaws. The first is an on-rails jeep escape that plays out as a pyrotechnic sightseeing tour through some lush jungle, with one or two cliffhanger moments with wrong turns and oncoming enemies. A jetski is later at Drake's command, and handles beautifully through some challenging rapids and riverside shootouts, with the usual staples of floating explosives and baddies at mysterious windows proving as challenging as ever. The only disappointment is that the shooting is handled in a disappointing and disjunctive 'stop and aim' manner that loses some of these sections' fluidity, and precludes firing while moving too quickly for enemies to aim or set traps – which is surely one of the points of using a vehicle in the first place.



ASSASSIN'S CREED

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3 PRICE: £50 (PC £35)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (PC JANUARY 25) PUBLISHER: UBISOFT
DEVELOPER: UBISOFT MONTREAL PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E177





The cities include many optional 'save a citizen' tasks – defeat the bullying soldiers and you'll be rewarded with the appearance of vigilantes (who block pursuing guards) and scholars (a form of cover for the similarly dressed Altaïr)

With his stalking gait and effortless run, his swift killing strike, his fearless parkour skills, *Assassin's Creed*'s star, Altaïr, is a triumph of animation in videogames. Never before has a player character been depicted with such clarity: the responsiveness with which he turns during a run; the way he palms off a wall to recover from a shove – control is never impeded and his physical connection with his environment is continually reinforced.

And what an environment he has to play in – the three Third Crusade-era cities, Acre, Damascus and Jerusalem, and the countryside connecting them, are not only beautifully realised on a visual level, feel convincingly organic and teem with virtual life, but are also entirely built around Altaïr's abilities. Their surfaces are covered in outcroppings and grilled windows, struts and beams. Rooftops and handholds are placed a leap's distance apart, making the process of traversing them, even in the midst of a headlong rush to avoid pursuing guards, remarkably, and pleasurably, assured. This is because Altaïr micromanages negotiating it all for you. Hold down the right trigger and sprint with a face button and he'll happily leap from joist to joist with you simply pointing him in the right direction. Hanging from a window ledge, he'll smoothly clamber up and down with direction from the left stick. But this is no attempt at dumbing down. Quite the opposite: it allows you to focus on the middle and far distance, assessing routes, risk and the bigger picture.

> Hold down the right trigger and sprint, and Altaïr will leap from joist to joist with you simply pointing him in the right direction



Despite feeling similar, the cities are stylistically different and characterised by colour: the drab grey of Acre, Jerusalem's rich blue-yellows (seen here), and the harsh gold of Damascus

It's therefore a pity that the bigger picture isn't quite so inspiring. For all Altaïr's characterful finesse, he has only a few different ways to meaningfully interact with his world. For each of the nine marks he's tasked to assassinate, Altaïr must gain at least three pieces of information to find out where he should perform the hit. This is gained from scouting the city by climbing the highest towers to survey the crowds and unlock a small assortment of missions: pickpocketing, intimidating (giving someone a beating until they squeal), eavesdropping (sitting on a nearby bench to listen in on a conversation) and assisting an informer with a series of hits or, ludicrously, collecting flags.

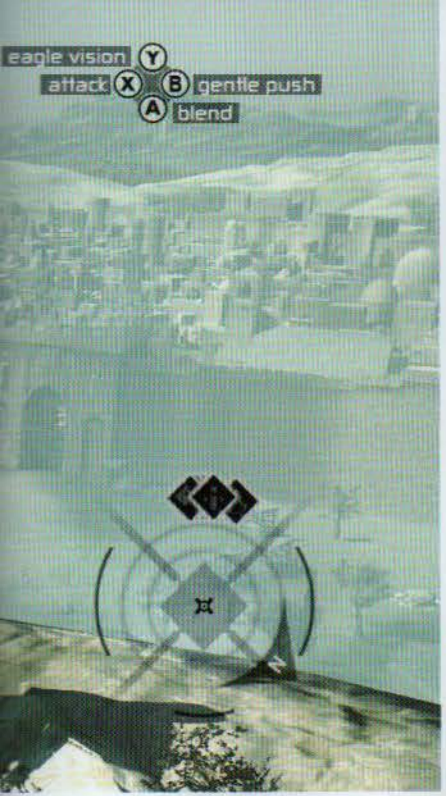
The result is repetition, and most missions are simple to complete. Though Altaïr will be obstructed by the shoves of gibbering loons and beggars getting in his way, and attract the attention of guards if he causes pot and box carriers to drop their loads, there's been little effort to use the crowds or tricky configurations of the 3D environment to increase the challenge. And for the actual kills, again, it feels like Ubisoft Montreal has missed an opportunity to create clever puzzles through guard patterns, architecture and crowd behaviour to encourage exploration of his acrobatic and slaying prowess. The reality is a series of set-pieces that seldom allow you to get in close with Altaïr's brutally insidious retracting blades the way you feel an assassin should.

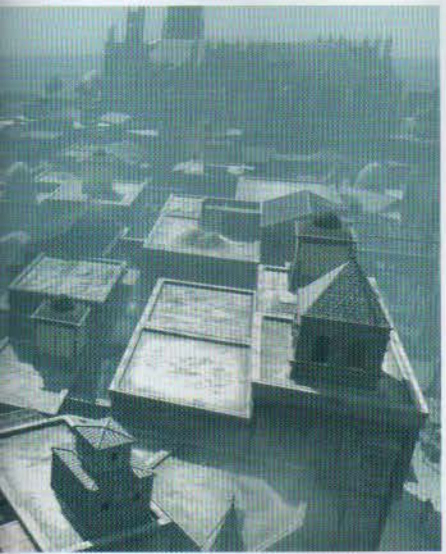


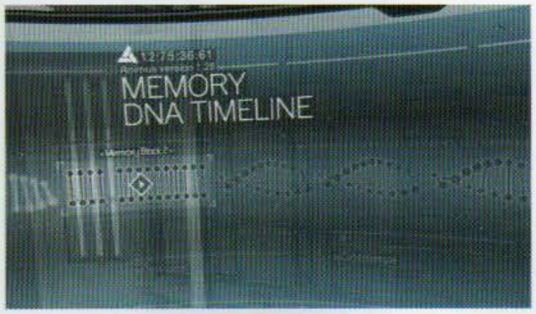


As if to prove it's an open-world game, *Assassin's Creed* includes collection sub-quests: if it's not flags (different types for different cities and neighbourhoods), it's finding and dispatching Templar knights

Binding the action together is a story that exposes *Assassin's Creed*'s much-heralded link with science-fiction at its very outset: the Holy Land circa 1191 is the construct of a machine called the Animus, which is able to read people's 'genetic memories'. It's entertaining nonsense but, despite the laudable but ultimately rather empty idea to ensure the player always has some form of control during cutscenes, it sadly boils down to a lot of talking – and Altaïr's dreary voice-acting. Overlaying it all is an ambitious theme about the folly of fixed ideologies and the absence of universal truths. None of Altaïr's targets, which come from both sides of the conflict, are wholly evil – a point made by a scene that appears once they've been slain. "You stole food from your people," Altaïr accuses William de Montferrat, who replies that he's actually been stockpiling it for an uncertain future. But while the story might







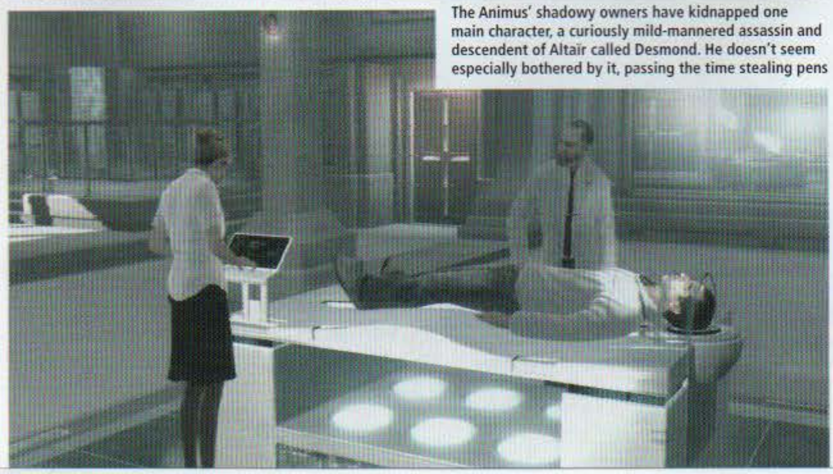
The game's sci-fi story unfortunately and somewhat clumsily gives an excuse for things like invisible walls in parts of the cities not yet unlocked (with a 'cannot access memory' message) and jumps in the narrative ('memory fast forwarding')



Horses are available to traverse the extensive, if somewhat underutilised countryside connecting the cities. They're animated and controlled with a grace that exceeds even *Shadow Of The Colossus*' Agro



The Animus' shadowy owners have kidnapped one main character, a curiously mild-mannered assassin and descendent of Altaïr called Desmond. He doesn't seem especially bothered by it, passing the time stealing pens



promote personal choice and freedom to act, like *BioShock*, the game does not: Altaïr is locked firmly into his fate.

And his fate in the final section is squeezed down to a forced and protracted sequence of fights that seems to forget Altaïr's raison d'etre entirely. Though sword fighting, a defensively pitched system based around delicate counter-attacks and dodges, works fine, it always feels as if Altaïr's at his most natural in flight – the exhilarating rush to break the line of sight from pursuing enemies and find hiding places to wait it out until the panic is over.

Ultimately, it's as if Ubisoft Montreal has failed to find a game worthy of its stunningly realised main character and sumptuous setting. It's unfortunate, as there is some enormous potential here, and for all its failings *Assassin's Creed* deserves to be played, and its achievements savoured. **[7]**

Unquashed masses



Though randomly generated and behaviourally simplistic, the crowds lend each city a great deal of character. They exhibit a wide range of appearances, and Acre, which has been invaded by Crusader forces, is filled with northern Europeans speaking in French and German as well as English. And to emphasise the political chaos the wars have brought upon the region, public speakers tirade against the infidels and the heathens. Sadly, there isn't much variety to what the citizens of *Assassin's Creed* say to Altaïr and each other, with "If he hurts himself, he has himself to blame" (on seeing Altaïr up on the roofs) and "I'll have your hand for that" (said by bullying guards to citizens) being particularly painfully common.



CRYSIS

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: CRYTEK PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E168



In Power Struggle, the aim is to control enough power facilities and alien crash sites to fund a nuclear weapon, for use on the opponent's HQ. Vehicle production facilities can also be seized to produce mobile artillery and spawn points





Besides giving you a chance to admire Crytek's ongoing fetish for guns, the inline setup system enforces the game's tactical values. While the keyboard shortcuts make the selection process quicker, it's advisable to seek cover before tinkering with your bits and bobs

Only Crytek, the studio propelled to the forefront of PC gaming by just one FPS, could make such a high-profile game feel like such an unknown. The more you're told of *Crysis*, the less you know for sure. The more features and components are announced, the more you wonder how anyone could wrestle with such a skulking beast. So much is at stake here, for genre, developer, publisher, hardware and even Microsoft's latest operating system. So many ideas and interests are on the table.

At least the premise is simple. A science team has vanished in the Lingshan Islands of the South China Sea, its findings stirring local North Korea into setting up camp – and a naval blockade. As a member of the US Army's elite Delta Force, you're sent in for a spot of search and rescue. Or, to ditch the euphemisms, crush, kill and destroy. With a stockpile of near-future tech strapped to your body, you have enough firepower to make Rambo look like Bambi. The attack options, then, for those who missed the two **Edge** features (**E**161, **E**174) and EA's marketing blitz: a nano-suit, which at the cost of recharging energy brings superhuman strength, speed, armour or disguise. A rifle, which like all the game's weapons can be inspected and modified without breaking from the action. A silencer. Various scopes and sights. Nightvision. Grenades. Tactical ammo types such as tranquiliser darts. Melee attacks. Saucepans. Flying toads.

There's more than enough to overwhelm even veterans of the keyboard and mouse. As long suspected, this is a far cry from *Far Cry*, less a holiday than a mission. The sightseeing opportunities are still there, but the freedoms of exploration are now combat-oriented. The Koreans, with their procedurally generated faces and Team America-worthy dialogue, waste no time in putting your vast resources to the test. The fun lies not in what your weapons can do – the rooftop leaps, seismic punches and terrifically modelled gunfire – but in what you do with them.

Vulgar examples would include barrel-rolling a jeep with a well-placed fist, blowing out tyres and throwing power generators through buildings. But *Crysis* is best when intimate. Its jungles offer such a dense cloak of vegetation that enemies, with just their flak jackets and colourful language, are often as elusive as you are. Their mistakes aren't the usual suicide charges and head-bobs of FPS soldiery – they're the subtle betrayals of a realistic world. Listen (or watch) for rustling leaves, a cracking branch or a splashed puddle, and the advantage is yours. Attack in haste and you're smoked.

It's been described as a game in which you have to challenge yourself to enjoy yourself. That sells it short, somewhat – the graphics alone threaten to stir the loins – but is essentially right. Almost any adversary, be it man or machine, grounded or airborne, can be toyed with; any set-piece can be shaped. If you want Hollywood, you stir up a hornet's nest of angry Koreans and brawl your way out. If you want *Splinter Cell*, you explore your options and hatch plans. If you want *Half-Life 2*, you find a household object and lob it at someone's head. Fashionably, *Crysis*' invention relies upon yours.

But as an adventure told through action bubbles and bottlenecks, it's the latter which let it down. Crytek has scoured the whole arid landscape of pop science-fiction for its story, jamming together clichés from Aliens, The Matrix, Independence Day – anything, essentially, in which someone marvels at 'the size of that thing'. Its principle cast of international supermen is lovable (and laughable) enough, especially its cockney

> Crytek has scoured the landscape of pop sci-fi, jamming together clichés from anything in which someone marvels at 'the size of that thing'





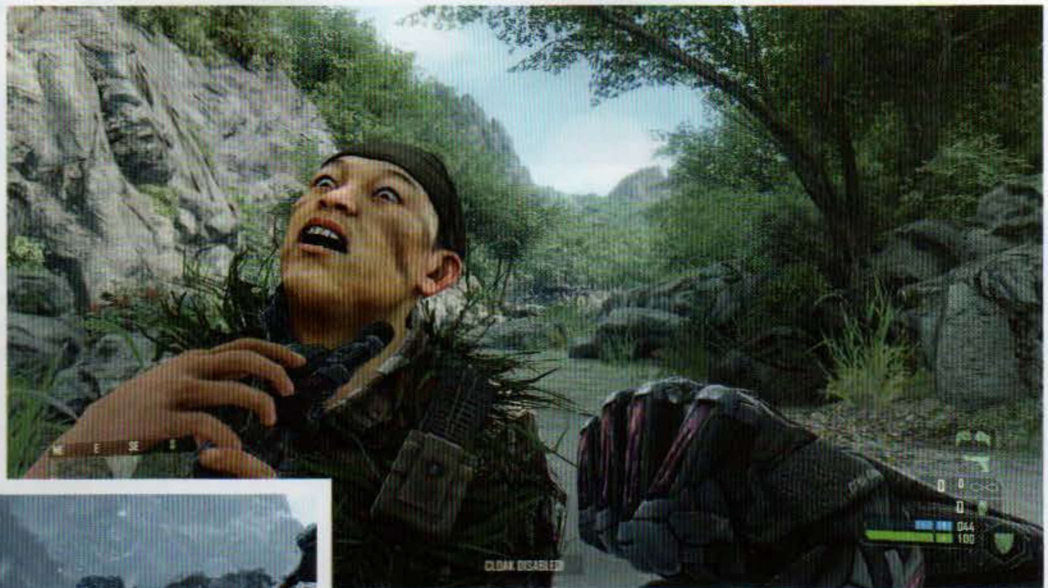


Bumping the difficulty to hard makes *Crysis* a much better game overall. The AI, with its frightening awareness of military tactics in a dynamic world, forces you to appreciate the breadth of possibilities





Don't be too scared by the time-of-day sequencer, voxel painter and other advanced options: Sandbox2 (left) has enough presets and tooltips to ease in you gently. If you can build a park in *Rollercoaster Tycoon*, you'll have little trouble with environments here







Crysis testifies to director Cevat Yerli's obsession with the virtual camera. Lighting effects are ubiquitous, creating a game low on fanciful art but off the scale in terms of realism



Both man and alien can be grabbed then thrown or whacked with enhanced strength. Other strength effects include a steadier aim and the ability to leap up to rooftops



Brit. But it's no more highbrow than *Gears Of War*, and the twist in its tale is a sour one.

Those much-touted second and third 'acts', in which squid-like aliens run amok and start freezing everything in sight, are actually confined to the last quarter of the game. And, despite a sumptuous zero-gravity section to mark their awakening (think *Descent*, but with jellyfish and neon), it's all a bit dumb. Suddenly, you're flying lethargic VTOLs into clumsy dogfights, manning mounted guns and, essentially, trying more to flee Lingshan than venture in. While no one said vanquishing *Far Cry*'s demons would be easy, it is sad to see them return.

Supporting up to 32 players, meanwhile, multiplayer *Crysis* is a robust mix of FPS convention and nanosuit tactics. It's enough to say that its deathmatch mode crosses *Quake III* with *Soldier Of Fortune*, bringing in almost all of the solo game's abilities and weapons. Power Struggle, meanwhile, is part *Battlefield* and part *Counter-Strike* Assault, with a crowd-pleasing nuclear twist. Can either survive the company of *Quake Wars* and *Team Fortress 2*? It'd be a shame if they didn't. There's enough unit-building and improvisation here to deserve a loyal following, and the learning curve seems a considerate one.

And, to quote QVC, that's not all you get. Public SDKs and map editors might be a dime a dozen on PC, but never has such a huge leap in technology been accompanied, on day one, by such a complete creative toolset. Sandbox2, which even comes with *Crysis*' demo, is a wonderful thing. Accessible, comprehensive and smart – for a complete forest, just group-select the brushes and drag one out – it's the bonus feature you simply can't ignore. Its potential for the creation of industry-standard user content is staggering. It is, ultimately, the making of a magnificent package.

If *Far Cry* was a game of ambition, then here is one of power. Power which Crytek has channelled, with both passion and care, into superb freewheeling gunplay. And power which extends a whole lot further than the game itself. Into the palm of your hand, for example. Into the history books of PC gaming. And into the future. **[9]**

Keeping it real



It's the system requirements which really put the cry in *Crysis*, even if you've anticipated its release by buying the latest hardware. Playing at DX10's 'very high' detail settings, at the native resolution of a modern widescreen flat-panel, absolutely requires two top-end video cards, and as much CPU power and RAM as you can afford. But you get what you pay for. DX10 doesn't just complement the 'videorealism' – it completes it. The depth-of-field effects on weapons and environments are more authentic, the particle effects denser, and the contrast between light and shadow generally greater. Many of the advanced luminance and transparency effects showcased at trade shows also seem to be DX10-exclusive. Make no mistake: enthusiast PC gaming just got (really) expensive again.



MASS EFFECT

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £50 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: BIOWARE PREVIOUSLY IN: E164



You're let off the moral leash far less often than in *KOTOR*, and most of the Renegade choices leave you looking like a petulant brat. Occasionally, you're given the chance to do something unsavoury – there's even a genocide – but seldom is it evil enough to give Alec Guinness the willies





So what, exactly, *is* a mass effect? Is it something to do with the outcome of elaborate physics experiments? Is it a time- and space-altering technology created by ancient aliens? (Apparently, it is.) Or is it what happens when BioWare, famed for *Baldur's Gate* and *Knights Of The Old Republic*, decides to make its own version of Star Wars?

You'd think that it was, given the effect on its target audience. Before anyone had actually played this game, everyone was in love with it. Visually sophisticated, obviously epic and only half as daft as its title suggests, it spoke directly to estranged fans of Lucasfilm's saga, all of whom appeared to be vocal gamers. Given the avenues of *KOTOR*, it went without saying that if Binks set foot in its universe, the option would be there to blow his brains across the screen.



The question: how would BioWare celebrate that freedom from George?

The answer: with guns. *Mass Effect* is part *KOTOR* and *Jade Empire*, part *Gears Of War* and *Ghost Recon*. Rather than a leisurely exchange of buffered commands, its combat is a close, intense firefight. The action pauses while you switch your party's weapons or deploy its 'biotic' abilities, but otherwise the forecast is for wall-hugging,

> Like Star Trek, Battlestar Galactica and Farscape it has a wonderfully nerdy kind of sex appeal. Think Buck Rogers meets Industrial Light & Magic

rifle-butting run-and-gun with just a scattering of sorcery.

Thematically, the old faves – the hero's journey, galactic peril and portentous dreams – are all there, but the end result feels like TV more than cinema. Like Star Trek, *Mass Effect*'s quests are peppered with leaden and didactic dialogue. Like Battlestar Galactica, it plays fast and loose with the lives of its characters, revelling in the prospect of apocalyptic events. Like Stargate or Farscape, it hops restlessly between worlds which look unique from some angles, identical from others. And, like all of them, it has a wonderfully nerdy kind of sex appeal. Think Buck Rogers meets Industrial Light & Magic.

In other words, it's *KOTOR* all over again, but without the licence. As either a user- or pre-defined character, you march towards destiny with absolutely everyone talking about you, focusing on your every move. Your backstory, a selectable tale of either privilege or woe, determines much of what is said and done. The plot, naff as it is, casts you as the first human inductee into the elite



Almost everything of value is kept under lock and QTE. These simple reflex tests never really evolve, at best adding a few more buttons to the sequence. While they're a cost-effective way of adding challenge to repetitive tasks, they're arguably overused





Much time is spent driving the Mako, an all-terrain cross between a Warthog and a tank. Its boosters can hop it over oncoming projectiles, while Omni-Gel, recycled from unwanted weapons, can repair it on the field



Planet surfaces aside, most of *Mass Effect* is clean and curvaceous. Corridors feel like catwalks, jumpsuits may as well have Honda written on them, and if you leant on the walls after a spring clean, you'd probably slip off









At first, you'll wonder if you'll ever find the cash for the more expensive armours, weapons and upgrades. Give it a few missions, however, and you'll have more than you know what to do with. Your away team comprises three people: how they carry up to 150 items is anyone's guess

Spectre organisation (no cats on laps, sadly), tasked with tracking down a rogue agent with a deadly interest in the Reapers, a forgotten race of mind-controlling robots.

The game's a real plate-spinner – and unfortunately it shows. The combat, limited to basic squad commands and gun types (shotgun, pistol, sniper and assault rifles) engages, but never electrifies. The biotic attacks, which typically stun the opposition or repair the squad, are so bland you'll opt for maximum firepower, which dominates the enemy if logically upgraded. An ill-advised 'normal' difficulty setting, by which only bosses scale to the player's level (and still can't compete), betrays the fact that there are two genres here, stats-based RPG and frenetic shooter, which don't really get along.

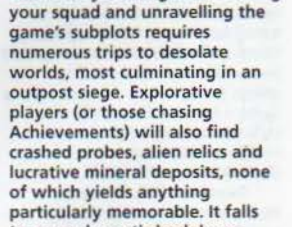
Other paths can be chosen, of course, and higher difficulty levels unlocked by repeat playthroughs. But none finds that elusive balance, and the story (especially its obvious ending) seldom justifies the search.

In the finest tradition of neo-Star Wars, *Mass Effect*'s cast is one of diplomats, officers and alien traders. Some are beautiful, others bizarre. Some even get angry from time to time. But few are actually worth the effort of conversation. "Tell me more," says your character. "Please don't," says the voice inside your head. Where are the vaudeville rogues in this galaxy? Where are the *entertainers*? They turn up occasionally, usually in a Babylon 5-esque hub called the Citadel, but then they're gone, snuffed out in the name of efficiency. The game strives so hard to be taken seriously that it winds up feeling relentlessly dour. Heaven forbid, there are times when you'd actually hug Binks.

Even you, the one supposedly in charge of the game's narrative, feel emotionally suppressed. That *Mass Effect* presents the same binary moral choices as *KOTOR* is no surprise – the Dark/Light balance there becomes Paragon/Renegade here – but you'd have expected a more nuanced result after all these years. The conversation wheel, which pops up early to keep the speech rolling, asks you to choose tone rather than precise words. At worst, the choices are so moderate as to be more or less the same, and the words which come out don't relate.

If it all sounds negative, don't despair: this stems more from disappointment than disdain. *Mass Effect* is still enjoyable enough to warrant 24 hours of play (completion with sub-missions), and the stops it makes en route are visually stunning. It just doesn't find what it goes looking for: the myth and exotica to adequately follow Star Wars. The fascination of *KOTOR*, a wish-fulfilment powerhouse, was to see it tugged hither and thither by over 20 years of fiction. BioWare's universe, with its almanac of histories and planetary profiles, pales in comparison. After Jedi knights and lightsabers, these soldiers and bullets just don't cut it. **[7]**

Intergalactic planetary



If *Mass Effect* has a motto, it's 'seek and ye shall grind'. Training your squad and unravelling the game's subplots requires numerous trips to desolate worlds, most culminating in an outpost siege. Explorative players (or those chasing Achievements) will also find crashed probes, alien relics and lucrative mineral deposits, none of which yields anything particularly memorable. It falls to some dramatic backdrops and the sheer joy or driving the Mako, the game's own Warthog, to keep the spirit of adventure alive. As boil-in-the-bag universes go, this one's decent enough, with stacks of room for downloadable content. Let's just hope that BioWare finds the time and wit to fill it with something substantial, not just rocks full of collectable trinkets.





While the physical interaction with worldly objects isn't as fully realised as in, say, *Half-Life 2*, there's just enough destruction to satisfy, with the explosive melons being a particular, if clichéd, highlight



Modern Warfare gives strong evidence of the appeal of 'full body realism': hands and other appendages are often visible and have a clearly defined relationship with the environment



The art direction is excellent throughout the oneplayer campaign (even if some details are flat textures that feel the need for enhanced bump mapping), while multiplayer also benefits from crisp map design and appearance

CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £50 (£30 PC)
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER: INFINITY WARD PREVIOUSLY IN: E178

Special forces feedback



In the unremitting chaos of battle, *Call Of Duty 4*'s more crucial details – kill or no kill? Headshot or miss? – could run the risk of being lost. Except that Infinity Ward understands something that many FPS developers fail to grasp: being hit by a bullet smarts quite a bit, and if one were to strike an enemy soldier in the neck he really ought to go down like a brick in a lift shaft.

Thanks to this, *Modern Warfare* is almost alarmingly satisfying, as distant targets fold like paper under precise double-taps and return blasts violently shake the viewcam, preventing accurate retaliation and enforcing the clever use of cover. Against *Resistance: FOM*, for instance – which often feels more like an exercise in pointing a cursor towards a slowly depleting energy bar – the level of feedback in *Call Of Duty 4* is remarkable.

Until now, it hasn't been clear exactly how Infinity Ward would engineer *Call Of Duty*'s relocation from World War II to 'the near future'. The answer is with confidence. *Modern Warfare* comfortably exceeds expectations and propels this hugely successful series to a new high without undermining any of the core principles that made the historically set *COD* games such accomplished firstperson shooters.

Well, almost. Ironically, the ambiguous modern setting is also the root of *Modern Warfare*'s major flaw, of which more later. What is immediately important to note is that the shift into modern battlefields provides an explosive upping of the ante that fills a broad-chested and appealingly stern singleplayer campaign.

A clear decision has been made to drive it home to players that warzones are unpleasant places to be, that bullets kill with ease, and that reckless soldiers return home only in wooden boxes. So just a few hits will leave the player perilously close to death. A single squeeze of the trigger can slay any enemy. And nowhere is safe for long. The result is heart-stopping entertainment, combining deeply satisfying visual impact from the environment and opposition (see 'Special forces feedback') with weapons that feel tangibly and terribly lethal from both ends of the barrel.

There's a streak of cocksure confidence visible throughout *COD4*'s campaign, and it's hard to believe that several deeply unsettling set-piece moments would have made the cut without such conviction from the developer. It takes several calculated risks, with continued success. During the final act, for instance, the rollercoaster pace loses steam during a disappointing corridor shootout through a blank military bunker. But this deeply ordinary episode only serves to heighten the exhilaration of the last breakneck mission, bringing *Modern Warfare* to a wholly satisfying climax that ranks alongside the best Hollywood action movie.

And, still, there are faults. The plot is pure hokum. Archetypal terrorists, an inexplicable Middle East insurgency, nuclear missile launches, yadda yadda... Tied as it is to unfamiliar locales and murky faux-politics, *Modern Warfare* can't hope to achieve the same poignancy rightly or wrongly wielded by its World War II-set predecessors. The liberation of Europe felt honourable in a way that will never be true of shelling faceless masses of this month's enemies of America from the comfort of a US bomber circling in the sky. Perhaps that is asking too much of a videogame.

But *Call Of Duty 4* performs so cohesively elsewhere that any irksome slips are more pronounced. More pressingly, soldiers are occasionally unaware of foes in close proximity, while progress is often dictated by invisible 'triggers' that, when crossed, either launch new waves of as-yet-unseen enemy or stop the otherwise endless spawning of fresh rifle-fodder. Finally, protests will be levelled at the short six or so hours of singleplayer gameplay. That is, of course, six hours of terrific gaming rather than 26 hours of dross.

Visually, kinetically and intuitively, however, *Modern Warfare* is relentlessly exciting and an overwhelming triumph. The thrillingly unforgiving multiplayer, with a compelling ranking system and stream of unlockables, makes this a truly great online experience. But what really glosses over any nagging faults is *Modern Warfare*'s sheer ballsy confidence in its own quality. Confidence that is never underserved. **[9]**



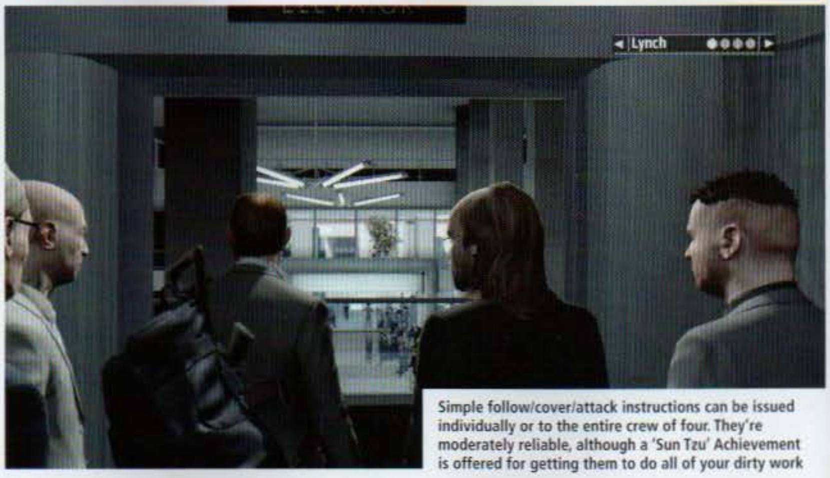
Call Of Duty 4 excels at providing high-intensity action, but the game is also aware of the need to contrast heart-racing highs with moments of low mobility and tension



While the gunplay centres on bread-and-butter ballistics, *Dead Men* nails the chunky power of assault rifles well. A favourite gun need never be discarded; when ammo runs dry, a nearby teammate will offer to top you up, provided you can reach them



A standoff with a dump truck; a giddying rappel down the side of a skyscraper (above); a cop-chase shootout from the back seat of a moving van: *Dead Men* certainly packs in plenty of key moments. Sadly, its keystone elements are lacking



Simple follow/cover/attack instructions can be issued individually or to the entire crew of four. They're moderately reliable, although a 'Sun Tzu' Achievement is offered for getting them to do all of your dirty work



KANE & LYNCH: DEAD MEN

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3
PRICE: £50 (360, PS3), £30 (PC) RELEASE: NOVEMBER 23
PUBLISHER: EIDOS DEVELOPER: IO INTERACTIVE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E167, E181

Mercantile mercs



Splitscreen co-op is offered, but feels like a slim offering in the wake of *Halo 3*'s collaborative glory. Live-supported multiplayer is present, though, catering for up to eight players in a bespoke 'Deadly Alliance' mode. All players begin as a team of mercenaries performing a heist. Any collected cash is shared out between remaining mercenaries. But, before it's deposited, it's possible to become a traitor, go rogue and keep all your gathered cash for yourself. If you're killed, then you become a guard, and are given a finder's fee for retrieving money from the mercs you take down, and even a bonus for slaying your assassin. It's a neat power-struggle setup, but, with *Halo 3*, *PGR4* and *Team Fortress 2* turning multiplayer gaming into a fully fledged career, it's icing on the cake for fans rather than a clincher for the undecided.

Kane & Lynch: Dead Men is, if nothing else, a brave production. There's a defiant ambition about it that's on a par with Agent 47's overreaching scenarios, but whereas *Hitman* shoots for grand set-piece complexity, *Dead Men* aims for grand set-piece intensity. With *Dead Men*, it's as if IO drew itself a bullseye target before even deciding what to hit it with. Its scenarios are striking in scope, but its gunplay can't quite keep pace. It features some moments of truly cinematic vision, but the technology and framework can't quite do them full justice.

For example, a nightclub scene picks up where *Blood Money*'s Mardi Gras stage left off. Packed with revellers, Kane has to press his way through the crush of bodies – there's copious character model repetition, but the sensation is still effective. An ensuing firefight sends the crowds scattering, offering some tension as you attempt to pick out the armed bodyguards from within the swarm of bodies. But, too soon, it's apparent that the throng of panicked clubbers are simply following headless-chicken loops, and none are evacuating the building. One rooftop skirmish later, and events force you to retrace your steps around the now-empty dancefloor, up against tougher enemies, a galling bit of recycling that rams home just how austere the gunplay can feel.

There are a number of high-impact moments ahead of this, but entire stretches of the game, and not just event spikes, are equally undulating. Some of its more open settings are home to some frantic, engaging showdowns with streams of police and armed guards. The foyer fracas and resulting push down a series of Japanese streets is a highlight that epitomises just how well *Dead Men* can do crime-flick action-glam when its gears run smoothly. Conversely, its somewhat more linear trawls – a prison break-in, for example, or the opening segment of an ill-fated bank robbery – can feel awfully dry and monochrome.

Dead Men's automatic cover system is a good intention that almost succeeds, pressing you up against the corners of an object a split-second after you stop near them. It's just not sharp enough in a pinch, however. The A button is overworked, covering actions, melee takedowns, reloading and weapon swaps, which can be cause for confusion in do-or-die situations. The game's dramatic flow arguably necessitates checkpoints instead of custom saving, but it needed to be smarter with those checkpoints, to better catch the bottleneck moments.

Which brings us back to *Hitman*, a series with the bigger-picture imagination that's so reminiscent of *Dead Men*'s approach. While Agent 47's adventures have been just as flawed and irritating, they've been buffered by one hell of a back-up: when best-laid plans go awry, there was room to indulge in almost comic levels of bloodshed and unruly, cathartic carnage in order to get the level finished. With *Dead Men*, there's no such flexibility, leaving it feeling all the more brittle in practice. The ingredients of a blockbuster-baiting shootout are there, but the resulting recipe means that *Kane & Lynch* is ultimately nothing pacier than dead men walking. **[6]**





There seems to be increasing danger in using in-game character models for cutscenes if they're not up to scratch (see *Conan* and even *Halo 3* for recent examples)



TONY HAWK'S PROVING GROUND

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS2, PS3 PRICE: £50
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER: NEVERSOFT PREVIOUSLY IN: E181

Oh, dear. Often it feels like the most difficult games to review are the really great ones. Those that engross and exhilarate so fundamentally that it can be tricky to step back and explain exactly why. When, in reality, the most difficult games to review are the average ones. The terminally unremarkable. The unambitious, box-ticking, deeply adequate games. Games like *Tony Hawk's Proving Ground*.

Proving Ground isn't awful, just the definition of a mass-production sequel, and mildly depressing evidence of the blind bullishness of fans, who seem content being spoon-fed endless reissues of the same game, and the timidity of developers, who refrain from tweaking a decade-old formula for fear of vexing those same fans.

Fortunately, in the time since *Tony Hawk's Project 8* was released, everything has changed. The more subdued but excellent *Skate* (**E**181, 8/10) has set new benchmarks in an otherwise stagnant genre that until now was defined by Tony Hawk's garish pinball. *Skate*'s existence splits genre fans into two camps: those looking for a skateboard game about skateboarding, and those looking for a skateboard game beyond skateboarding. By rights, *Proving Ground* ought to bring fireworks and spectacle where *Skate* provided realistic sporting feats. This isn't the case.

It doesn't help that *Proving Ground* lacks the instant, bombastic excitement freely hoofed around by previous episodes in the series. Or that it looks so drab. On close appraisal there are smooth textures and impressive clothing details to admire, but the overall effect is terribly lifeless.

Much like the career mode. With no Freeskate option immediately available, players are glued to a path of endlessly unlocking new areas through career progression, progression which involves an unremittingly dull slog through idiot-simple intros to basics like manuals or grinds. It isn't even possible to trigger Nail the Trick mode prior to it being taught in career mode, which only frustrates skilled veterans and enforces a dumbed-down approach to *Proving Ground*'s early action.

There is, at least, an attempt to freshen things up. There are three career 'paths' to pursue, adding the spice of choice, and Nail the Grab and Nail the Manual modes appear.





One edge *Proving Ground* has over *Skate* lies in its sheer number of tricks, including some spectacular flatland flippery. Nail the Trick mode is still the best thing, which should worry Neversoft, given how closely it echoes *Skate*'s approach





The Rigger career path (left) offers a neat skew on the traditional gameplay, putting you in control of building a skate-friendly environment from limited skatepark pieces. Though the impression that remains is of how difficult a task it is to create a useable and entertaining structure



Each career path has a guide who sagely dishes out task after task, though the potential of each style of career is never really fully realised, thanks to Neversoft's aversion here to taking any significant risk

In addition, once the restrictive career handholding subsides, the appeal increases considerably. And, crucially, success still demands a level of nimble-fingered skill and split-second invention that can feel raucously enjoyable at times.

Beyond these scattered positives, however, *Proving Ground* resembles nothing so much as a monotonous number-chase when compared to *Skate*'s more intuitive and satisfying take on the sport. As a result, *Tony Hawk*'s relentless button-tapping can feel terrifically outdated and robotic. Moments of breathless combos are stalled by an irritatingly over-long bail animation – which can be skipped, requiring a lightning-fast button press, but will still befall every player once in a while. Career goals follow 'do this, like this, for this reward' patterns, and feel more like dog-training than satisfying achievements. The grimy Philadelphia locale, meanwhile, is a lesson in how not to create a vibrant videogame world.

Tony Hawk's Proving Ground is, at best, a functional sequel. It gives the fans what they want, throws in a handful of awkward or undeveloped ideas, and leaves it there. At worst, it's a poor entry to the *Tony Hawk's* lineage. But against the flair and style offered by *Skate* and its progressive enjoyment of simply exerting control over two feet of plywood, *Proving Ground* feels like little more than a rolling relic. **[6]**

Push off

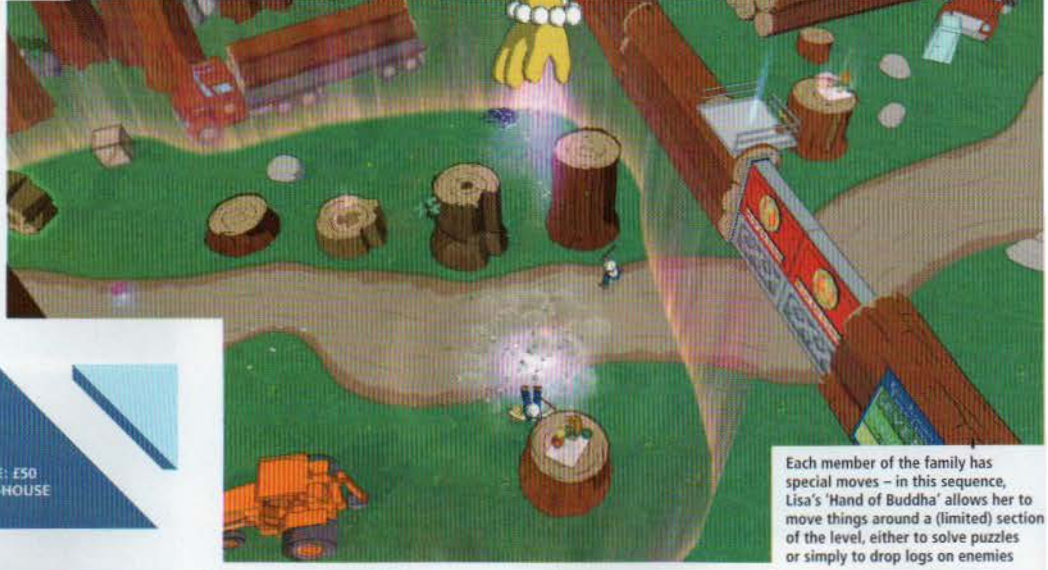


***Proving Ground*'s new Aggro Push system isn't a good idea. While reasonable in theory – pump a button during the correct 'window' of time to push harder and reach high speed – in practice it feels arbitrary. Yes, success will considerably increase a skater's speed and enable bigger leaps. Yet the Aggro Push occurs more regularly as a further obstacle to progression (get it right: pass; get it wrong: fail) than a useful aid to chasing big scores. Worst of all is how incredibly jarring it is when the player's 'professional' sportsman is still able to foul up a technique mastered by even the weakest amateur skater.**



THE SIMPSONS GAME

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS2, PS3, Wii PRICE: £50
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E179



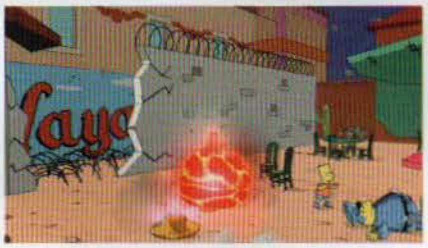
Each member of the family has special moves – in this sequence, Lisa's 'Hand of Buddha' allows her to move things around a (limited) section of the level, either to solve puzzles or simply to drop logs on enemies

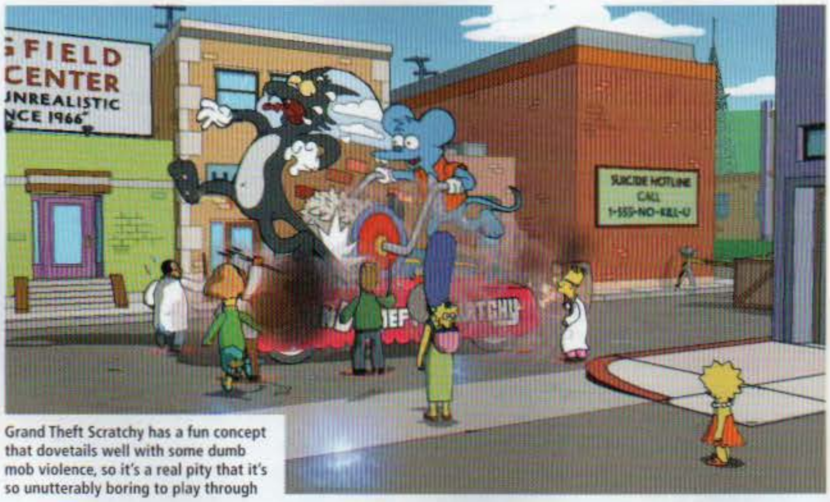
Sim Simpsons



One of the game's highlights is an encounter with Will Wright, the creator (as his Simpsons incarnation is none-too-slow to inform us) of *Sim City* and *The Sims*, and in this universe a destroyer of old games who zooms around on the mouse selector icon from *The Sims* as you attempt to complete a task, shouting things like "Any game without 'Sim' in the title sucks!" It's a high point, not least because it's lampooning a recognisable face from the videogame industry, and done well. It does, however, make you acutely aware of how rarely gaming figures and culture feature in real depth throughout the rest of the game.







Grand Theft Scratchy has a fun concept that dovetails well with some dumb mob violence, so it's a real pity that it's so unutterably boring to play through

To say that there has never been a good Simpsons videogame is true, but the reason for bringing it up is that it's the context for what might be the first. *The Simpsons Game* is about the Simpsons, but it's also about the Simpsons being in a game and their history within games. It uses the characters, settings and style to lampoon and occasionally defend gaming and its place within contemporary debate. At least, that's the idea.

In terms of capturing the humour of the show, the game is successful. There are great moments, laugh-out-loud moments even, although also a good number of disappointingly flat jokes. Walking around Springfield (which acts as a kind of hub) is a treat the first time around, but the voice samples quickly repeat and some simply aren't funny; the Simpsons at its best is the antithesis of catchphrase comedy, something occasionally lost in this title. The storyline is similary mixed, with some moments that stand up to some of the best the TV series has to offer, and others that don't. But the overriding impression is positive, because few games based on other media come close to *TSG*'s relationship with its source material.

An important part of this is that it faithfully captures the graphical charm of Springfield and its citizens. Presentation isn't perfect, however – draw distance, in particular, is poor, while other incongruous elements are simply the result of bad decisions. Using in-engine cutscenes next to the HD cartoon sequences that bookend levels, for example, serves to break what is otherwise a convincing illusion.

The bigger issue is that the game underneath the exceptional surface is only an average one, even if makes an interesting stab at giving each of its lead characters distinct special abilities, and strives to mix up play styles between the levels. The frequent use of the term 'parody' in connection with *TGS* is misjudged, since the levels never rise to the potential of the script and actually investigate game conventions, preferring a safe and ultimately deadening template that is almost a joke itself. It's full of platforming frustrations, crowds of enemies that have no tactic other than surrounding you in numbers, and bland puzzles. Levels are frequently surrounded by a bottomless pit of some kind, or a deadly liquid, or burning coals and so on, and filled with things that have been seen countless times before. The game does have its own defence mechanism here in the form of collectable game clichés, of which there are 32, which are heralded by Comic Book Guy and recognise the ubiquity of certain elements – double-jumps, invisible walls, etc – within gaming as a whole. Does this recognition excuse the predictable design that depends on precisely those clichés? Or is it in reality just a lazy get-out clause?

Ultimately, much of the drive spurring players onwards to completion depends on the game's cutscenes, and in this respect it's a backwards step, relying on the crutch of a strong licence to hide fundamental shortcomings. And because of that, any assessment has to end on one of the biggest clichés of them all: if you like The Simpsons, you'll like this game. **[5]**



Kang and Kodos are among the instantly recognisable supporting cast in the game, and in this section try to take over Springfield by creating killer zombie dolphins



Despite a faltering framerate, *Zack & Wiki* is one of the more attractive games available on Wii, throwing around a vibrant cel-shaded cast and some gorgeous incidental effects such as glowing embers and falling snow



ZACK & WIKI: QUEST FOR BARBAROS' TREASURE

FORMAT: Wii PRICE: £40 RELEASE: DECEMBER 7
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Technically a point-and-click adventure, *Zack & Wiki* is certainly a gentle setup. The cursor is accompanied by a generous spotlight that eases hotspot detection and our hero, Zack, never carries more than one object at any time. For those weaned on item inventories of no less than 50 bits and bobs this may seem a tad limited. In actual fact, Capcom has culled a great deal of nonsense to create a console-friendly adventure, a Wii-friendly adventure.

Zack is lacking the comprehensive verb sheet that so empowered earlier point-and-click heroes. Instead, each item is dealt with via replication of actions you would associate with the item. Click any useable hotspot and a Remote pose must be struck and the action enacted. From simple lever cranks to rotational unscrewing, *Zack & Wiki* finally puts to use the myriad Remote possibilities touched on in *WarioWare: Smooth Moves*.

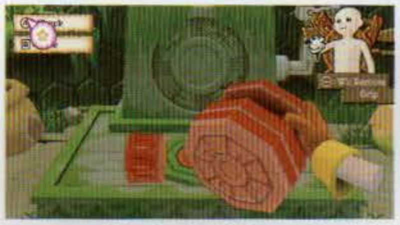
Occasionally, motions can be completed accidentally – questioning the honesty of previous gestures – but for every vertical lever inexplicably tugged with a horizontal Remote there's pointer-aimed dusting or button-tapping fluting to reinforce otherwise brilliant Wii application. All this would be moot, of course, if little was done to stitch these moments into a coherent whole, and it's here that *Zack & Wiki* leaves *WarioWare* behind.

Split into stages, each features a treasure chest in plain sight surrounded by a great deal of unpleasantness. These may look like crumbling ruins and lush tropical vistas, but strip away the dressing and you're left with nothing more than Heath Robinson-style contraptions designed to squish young Zack in brutal cartoon fashion. The puzzle, therefore, is how to clog the arteries of these structures and prevent their machinations from playing out.

It's puzzling for puzzling's sake – no narrative rewards, just access to the next conundrum. In the hands of bright sparks, this is to be *Zack & Wiki*'s greatest undoing: waltz through the 24 puzzles and the game is solved, done for good. An arcadey IQ score system may try to tempt players into repeat runs, but few puzzles offer alternate solutions for score improvement and the number of re-runs needed after dying mid-puzzle turns you into a pretty mean speedrunner in the course of your first runthrough, let alone a second.

And so, all eyes fall on the puzzles themselves. For the most part they're challenging applications of scientific basics – using levers, heat, angles, etc – and it's when the game relies on things other than these that it begins to stumble. Specific foes transforming into items upon the tolling of a bell and boss fights that require projectile dodging enter into trial-and-error territory – largely thanks to their secret rules that you have to work out for yourself.

As with the high scores, it's this bowing to gaming whimsy that most disappoints in *Zack & Wiki*, but it's a disappointment that fundamentally stems from having tasted the delight of the real via the Remote gestures and purer logic. It's for these latter elements, delivered only as this hardware can, that we should remain hugely grateful. **[8]**

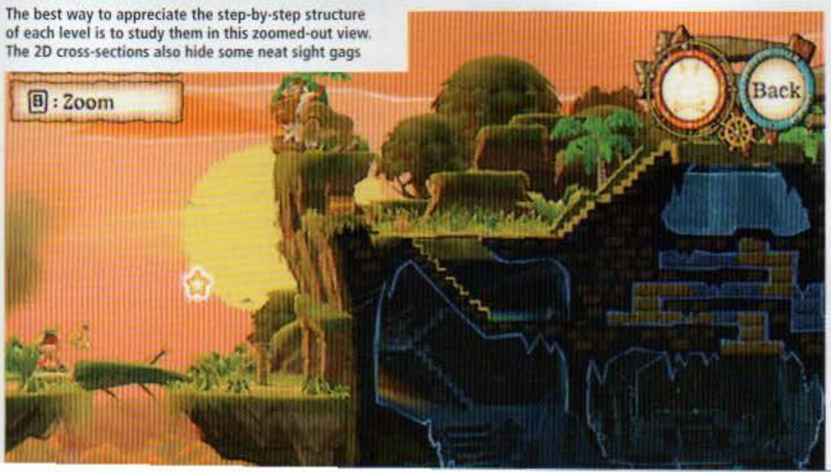




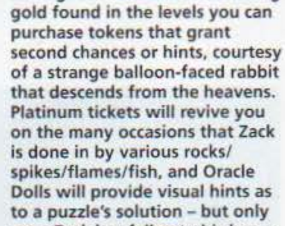
Your command of moving items in 3D space (above left) is put to the test as these stones require rotating and flipping to construct a totem. Boss fights (above right) are simply puzzles under the aggressive eye of an elemental fiend. On top of the usual puzzle mishandling you need to keep an eye out for their attacks



The best way to appreciate the step-by-step structure of each level is to study them in this zoomed-out view. The 2D cross-sections also hide some neat sight gags



Once more, with feeling



Help is on hand in various forms throughout the adventure. Using gold found in the levels you can purchase tokens that grant second chances or hints, courtesy of a strange balloon-faced rabbit that descends from the heavens. Platinum tickets will revive you on the many occasions that Zack is done in by various rocks/spikes/flames/fish, and Oracle Dolls will provide visual hints as to a puzzle's solution – but only once Zack has fallen to his knees in desperate prayer. Got your pride? Enlist help from a friend (or three) who can use their Remote to draw on the screen and offer solutions. It makes for a surprisingly good party game.





Although many quests require you to be somewhere at a certain time of day, there is no convenient 'wait' function – you have to find a campfire or a friendly house first

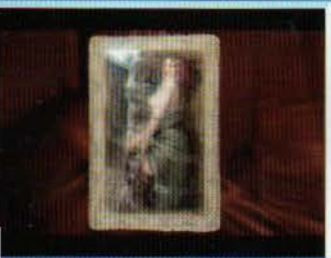




THE WITCHER

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ATARI DEVELOPER: CD PROJEKT
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E151, E164, E174

Badly painted lady



One way in which *The Witcher's* maturity manifests itself is in your ability to wow and bed many of the game's poorly drawn and preposterously breasted female characters. After a few perfunctory dialogue options dispense with foreplay, the scene cuts away to a blurry but suggestive video, over which is displayed a pin-up illustration of your conquest. Sexual relationships in games are no bad thing, certainly, but they need to set their sights slightly higher than *Leisure Suit Larry*.

The grim fantasy world of The Witcher, created by Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski, offers a mature and rich vein of fiction for adaptation; underneath the usual Tolkienesque scenery is a complex and political world, without polar extremes of good or evil, which presents its protagonist's career in monster slaying with wry cynicism. CD Projekt's muddled RPG is often elevated by its basis in this fiction – but, almost in equal measure, the game fumbles its potential with unanticipated incompetence.

Geralt, the white-haired Witcher (or warlock) of the title, is persuasively drawn, depicted with glowering and chiselled realism – at times eloquent, at others menacingly laconic. Elsewhere, other characters don't receive such careful treatment – most of those you meet are jarringly caricatured, their voice-acting is almost universally poor (while the dialogue itself rarely offers up the wit of the novels), and some dismal facial animation frequently makes these lacklustre performances absurd.

It's odd that this should be the case because the game's artistic qualities otherwise seem to trump its functionality. Character, journal and inventory screens are an aesthetic indulgence that comes at the expense of displaying information clearly. The environments – expansive, interconnected hubs detailing medieval townships, woody countryside and desolate marshlands – are convincing and foreboding locations. Their layout, however, is poor in terms of the play experience, knee-high fences often frustrating your attempts to go via the most obvious route.

Similarly, the potential of *The Witcher's* combat is undermined by implementation problems. There are three stances from which to choose – strong, quick and group fighting styles – and you click on enemies in rhythm, stringing together combos. However, the indirect means of control over Geralt makes him inexplicably unresponsive at times, and, frustratingly, you can't select your combat style before you draw your sword. Since Geralt insists on putting his weapon away after a few moments of inaction, and during any cutscene, you frequently find yourself injured before you're given the means to defend yourself.

In time, your increasing abilities, spells and potions add interest to combat. In fact, the game's horizons broaden considerably once you get into the city of Vizima, where you find yourself embroiled in an elaborate conspiracy. And there are some narrative successes – decisions made much earlier in the game now have significance some ten hours later. However, the game struggles with its increased scope and intricacy. Dialogue options sometimes discuss plot points of which you're unaware; certain quest choices that would seem to be in contradiction don't always cancel each other out; and the logging of your discoveries is erratic and unclear. Ultimately, advancement relies not on player intelligence, but on exhausting the barmy array of possibilities in the hope that Geralt makes a leap of logic that you otherwise cannot.

The Witcher was an exciting prospect – a clearly realised mature fantasy which aimed to embroil the player in a large, interweaving narrative. Such ambitions outstrip the game's capability, and its periodically inept execution proves to be one curse Geralt can't lift. **[5]**



The environments of *The Witcher* are certainly atmospheric, and the dynamic weather system reproduces the feel of natural light, adding considerably to the world's overall fidelity



The character skills screen is an example of poor interface design – it's simply not clear which information is most important





BLADESTORM: THE HUNDRED YEARS' WAR

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3 PRICE: £40 (360), £50 (PS3)
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: KOEI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



An experience gauge on the HUD shows how close your current unit type is to levelling up, a useful visual element to help players decide whether to stick with the current squad type or run off in search of an alternative

Koei's sprawling battlefield epics have a rhythm and style that is established in the gaming consciousness. The image of an eastern, historically named protagonist cutting furious paths through an ocean of enemy soldiers like some deadly spinning-top is, thanks to *Dynasty Warriors'* many and ostensibly identical sequels, now over-familiar. But to dismiss *Bladestorm* as nothing more than a Hundred Years War-branded version of *Warriors* is to do it massive disservice. The shift to European soil is far more than an aesthetic and thematic one: it has transformed the very foundations that have thus far defined Koei's output.

You play as a mercenary, choosing a name, sex and voice for yourself at the start of the game. A local tavern acts as a hub where you kit out your character, learn new skills and abilities, eavesdrop on gossip and, crucially, pick up battle contracts with either the French or English armies. As a freelance fighter you can switch allegiance between battles without penalty. Indeed, the game positively encourages you to assume the role of causeless entrepreneur, chasing money and fame rather than beliefs or loyalty.

Once you've chosen a side and a battlefront, you're deposited on to one of the green and lush environments that make up the game's playscapes. As a squadron leader you can acquisition any nearby group of soldiers – important because, though it's possible to go it alone, your character will quickly become overwhelmed by enemies unless they're supported by an allied unit. To begin, you can commandeer just three types of units: swordsmen, cavalry or archers. Once under your command the soldiers follow your character around the battlefield and can be controlled as a group with both normal and special attacks specific to their type.



Archer units behave in a different way to most other ground-based units. A 'pinpoint' move initiates a zoomed-in, sniper-type viewpoint allowing you to pick distant targets with care

Squad types vary hugely in the way they behave and, with 40 different varieties to unlock through the game (by finding appropriate strategy 'books' in dropped treasure chests), there's a broad variety of ways to play. As experience points (used for levelling up attributes) earned in the battlefield are only credited to the unit type you're controlling at the time, the onus is very much on the player to choose a path through the game. Prefer fighting from a distance? Simply focus all your command on bowmen, magic users and artillery.



The compartmentalised flow of play makes this a much broader experience than the *Dynasty Warriors* series, even though the way battles play out – allowing you to focus specifically on racing to take down an objective like a crack hit squad or taking your time advancing the whole army, stronghold by stronghold – are similar. The metagame levelling systems are arranged in such a way as to get players hooked and invested in their character very quickly and, while there's a steep learning curve at first, this soon smoothes into an even slope of addictive wargaming. As such, *Bladestorm* works hard to appease both the keen strategist and the action-hungry player, while confidently answering critics who claim that Koei is nothing more than a one-trick warhorse.

[8]



Choosing to fight for the stronger side will enable you to net more money (to improve your equipment, or hire in support), while siding with the underdog will help raise rank and fame – crucial for gaining better work in future





Bladestorm's sweeping orchestral and operatic soundtrack is far more fitting than the screeching guitars and thumping bass familiar from the *Warriors* games, elevating the sense of drama and occasion in the game

Turning the tide



With each kill your unit makes, a morale gauge fills a little. When your morale becomes high enough the titular Bladestorm status is triggered, a short time during which your squadron enjoy greatly enhanced abilities enabling them to plough through enemy units and quickly gain ground. It's also possible to equip your character with consumable items (bought from the tavern) which cause all manner of beneficial temporary status effects on either the allied or enemy units in your vicinity. This, combined with the ability to call in hired extra support (at a cost) with the touch of a button, means it's possible to quickly turn the tide of a difficult fight with some careful planning.



CASTLEVANIA: THE DRACULA X CHRONICLES

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £30
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), MARCH (UK)
PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

The resoundingly successful side-scrolling *Castlevania* titles have been evolved and refined as sequel has succeeded to sequel. In stark contrast, the parallel 3D releases bearing the family name have floundered, shifting their foundations from release to release in desperate search of a successful template that has so far failed to emerge.

For this remake of the PC Engine Duo's much-lauded, Japanese-only *Rondo Of Blood*, Konami seeks a compromise, recasting the original 2D title's framework and gameplay with 3D models and environments. It's superfluous – the new engine not only fails to affect the original's gameplay in any meaningful way but also brings no aesthetic profit, leaving you pining for the sharper, more accomplished sprites and backgrounds of yesteryear.

Castlevania fans who favour the tougher, action-oriented direction of the pre-*Symphony Of The Night* titles (*Rondo Of Blood* is often called the best) will be pleased that the game's mechanics have been left alone save for some subtle control tweaks and a rearranging of the copious secret areas. But newcomers be warned: this is gaming at its most demanding.

The level structure, which tasks players with crossing numerous screens' worth of castle, battling undead enemies with a mixture of whip and projectiles before facing up to a boss, is well-worn, but rarely have grunts played so mean. Every one must be approached with caution. As well as requiring multiple hits, most

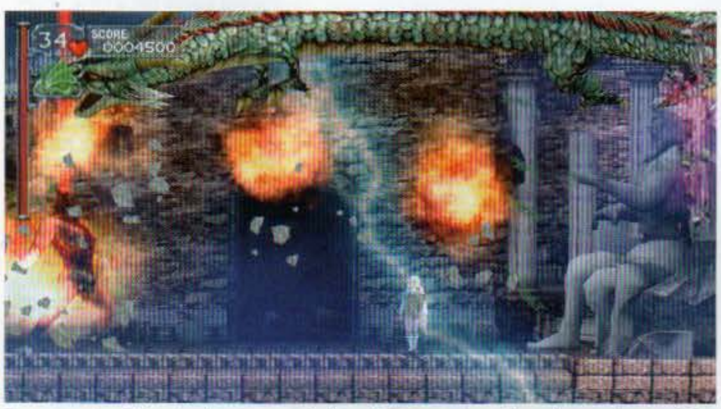


The remake runs at a disappointing 30fps. This conspires with the relative imprecision of polygonal collision detection to make the game feel less smooth and exact than the original

enemies can empty your character's health bar in three or four strikes.

The stakes are raised through miserly checkpointing and the fact that, once your three lives are gone, you're forced to restart the stage. For players who have lost – or never had – the patience required to learn a level's intricacies before it can be conquered, the demands may be too high. There is much to be had from this style of gaming but, as was the case with Capcom's *Ghouls 'N Ghosts*, it very much depends on an individual player's temperament.

Konami has sought to spur gamers on by including a bundle of generous extras: a (disappointing) port of the original *Rondo Of Blood* awaits unlocking beside a rearranged version of the PlayStation's celebrated *Symphony*. That these significant incentives must be won with skill and doggedness will irritate some. But for those taking the required approach this will be a generous and rounded *Castlevania* package, offering a sometimes grim but always compelling experience. **[7]**



The new version of *Symphony* boasts a reworked translation, new voice-acting and a new character, Maria Renard. Maria can also be used in *Rondo Of Blood* but only after you locate and free her from the castle



SILENT HILL ORIGINS

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: CLIMAX
PREVIOUSLY IN: E180



Silent Hill Origins is a baffling game. In certain respects it is leagues ahead of most other handheld titles – primarily in creating a sense of immersion, claustrophobia and fear. In other respects, it's a by-the-numbers conversion that seems to forget the device it's running on.

Easily the best aspect of the game is its suite of lighting effects. So much is set in murky environments that such illumination is crucial, and from peering into the distance to watching the shadows cast by your flashlight around banisters and columns, the results are exceptional. Added to this are the excellent score and spot effects, the former ambient and disconcertingly jarring, the latter rarely failing to make the player fearful at the right moments. The use of a 'static' effect when monsters are





You'll happen across a variety of horribly grisly ends (in addition to the ones caused by your own hand via various household objects), all enhanced by some magnificent lighting effects

nearby is also well done and creates memorably tense moments.

But there are other ways in which *Silent Hill: Origins* has not been optimised: the puzzles are often multi-part problems that depend upon your remembering something or writing it down – neither being ideal in a game running on a portable system. And the combat, as ever in *Silent Hill* games, is limited: the finishing moves occasionally refuse to work, and weapons break too quickly. However, the ability to use toasters, televisions and so on is a great inclusion – it's a pleasure to smash particularly annoying foes with table lamps.

Silent Hill: Origins is a high quality game that will please fans of the series but win it few new ones – and it's baffling to see some conventions jettisoned from the portable platform while others well past their best have been retained. But in terms of creating an atmosphere and playing with it, there's nothing quite like it on a handheld system. **[7]**





Mirrors allow Travis to pass between the dual worlds of Silent Hill: the surfaces show their room's equivalent in the opposite realm, which through indirect suggestion and decay create a macabre silent comment on the ongoing story



HELLGATE: LONDON

FORMAT: PC PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: FLAGSHIP STUDIOS
PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E173, E181

There's generally little worse in an appraisal of a game than a limp 'your mileage may vary' summation. Unfortunately, *Hellgate* initially appears to force just such a split decision, based on what exactly you find rewarding about playing games. If character, storyline and exploration provide your primary motivation, *Hellgate* will be a massive disappointment – particularly given the promise of the imaginative fiction. If, however, your main driving force is hitting the next XP level or collecting marginally more effective loot, you're likely to see Flagship's effort in a more positive light. One thing is certain: *Hellgate* has far more in common with the MMORPG template than many will be expecting.

But while *World Of WarCraft* and its peers provide variety through landscape, *Hellgate* fails utterly to conjure any motivation to investigate the next instanced dungeon. The expertly tessellated procedural levels may be well constructed from a technological standpoint, but thematically the rot quickly sets in. This would be less of an issue were the few handcrafted levels a worthy justification for enduring acres of identical tunnels and streets. Instead they are constructed from the same assets as the procedural grab bag, with only the odd crudely recreated landmark, such as the exceptionally underwhelming Piccadilly Circus, revealing them as unique.

Mechanically, the game has well-conceived elements, which at the very least ease the quest to collect the next cuirass. Quick loadout switching allows for three combinations of handheld kit to be chosen on the fly, and items that cannot be used or are obsolete can be disassembled, their parts used to upgrade weapons or armour. Combat itself is engaging, if not enthralling, but there's an admirable difference between classes, with sword-oriented Templars lending themselves to a thirdperson viewpoint and Hunters, with their ranged weaponry, more to the firstperson option.

Ultimately, with its similarity to MMOs, *Hellgate: London* makes more sense in multiplayer, particularly as the content is exactly the same in both. Even so, for most there'll be little impetus to advance, and without motivation the hundreds of items and scores of dungeons become nothing more than hollow figures. **[6]**





In multiplayer, the class variety lends itself to carefully constructed teams and makes more sense. Unfortunately, with guild play reserved for the otherwise uninspiring subscription service, many will be forced to adventure alone

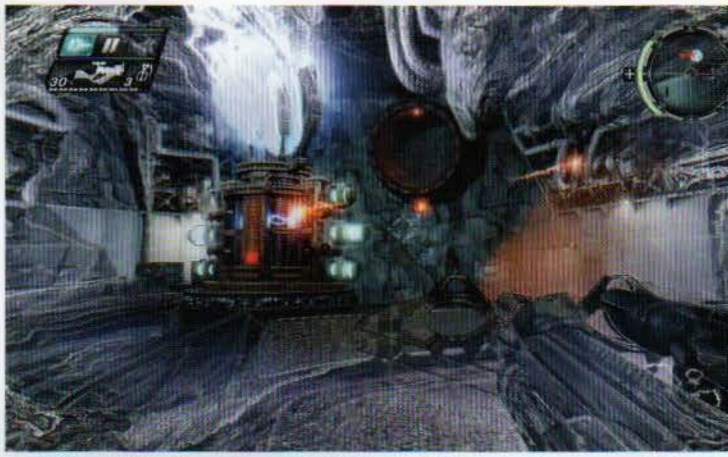


There's not much in the way of variety when it comes to visual content; Flagship's much-touted procedural generation is simply spread too thinly



TIMESHIFT

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS3
PRICE: £35 (PC), £50 (360, PS3) RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SIERRA DEVELOPER: SABER INTERACTIVE
PREVIOUSLY IN: E157, E167, E176



***TimeShift*'s troubled development has seen it switch from its original steampunk style, presumably in an attempt to better mimic successful shooters like *Gears Of War*. The result is schizophrenic art direction**

The opening 45 minutes of *TimeShift* are an unhappy experience. Despite a slickly directed introductory cutscene, the story rapidly becomes muddled by its own kleptomania: playing as a mute physicist with a surprising propensity for violence, you travel back through time in pursuit of the evil Dr Krone, arriving in an alternate past to discover that he has subjugated the world with his advanced technology and now lives in a giant robo-spider. The ugly, rain-soaked, ruined dystopia in which you find yourself, with its propaganda screens and floundering resistance movement, leads you to fear that the entire game might be a corridor shooter incompetently stitched from the offcuts of *Gears Of War* and *Half-Life 2*.

Fortunately, although nagging déjà vu persists throughout, *TimeShift*'s almost-unique selling point comes into its own as soon as you get out of the cramped city: the ability to slow, pause and reverse time becomes a joyful tactical accessory in the more open environments. It's unashamedly a gimmick, and one that has been explored before, but is no less entertaining for this. Some of its tricks just never get old: there's an unending delight in your ability to pause time, pepper an entire squad of soldiers with explosive bolts and then watch them tumble into pieces as time resumes. It's a feeling of empowerment that is rather well balanced against your vulnerability and the number of foes you encounter.

This is one of the few things *TimeShift* does well – its story is nigh-irrelevant, the art direction veers all over the place, and its smattering of puzzles are so perfunctory as to barely register. So limited are *TimeShift*'s ambitions that it often feels like the game itself has travelled from a bygone era, when the most important thing about a shooter was the number of weapons it had. Yet, despite all this, *TimeShift* knows its strengths. It may have few aspirations beyond being a dumb FPS, but it never fails to make the best of its limited talents. **[6]**





The game auto-selects the most tactically appropriate power, so all three are activated on a single button. It will mostly get it right, but you can manually override its choice anyway



MUTANT STORM EMPIRE

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £10 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: POMPOM
PREVIOUSLY IN: E181

At first glance it appears that, if *Mutant Storm* was PomPom's *Robotron*, then *Mutant Storm Empire* is its *Smash TV*, the first game's isolated rooms making way for a more complex structure of interlinked levels and stages. But it's not that simple, because *Empire* is just as likely to make you think of *R-Type*, or *Ikaruga*, or PomPom's own *Space Tripper*. And there's far more to this than a sticky-fingered flip through the classics: closer inspection reveals that, once again, *Mutant Storm* has taken an established template and crafted something new and distinctive.

The most surprising addition is the new combo system, a Treasure-like arrangement which awards points for shooting uninterrupted chains of specific enemies. Simple at first, the original game's bait-ball of beasties soon becomes a confounding snarl of differing targets, each misplaced shot bringing a potential bonus to a sad anticlimax. It adds an entirely fresh dynamic to the game: levels that originally seem designed for hectic survival marathons are revealed as intricate risk-reward puzzles.

Altering the way the game is played on a fundamental level, at times the combo system is almost too refined, with cold strategy reducing some of the more frantic rooms to feats of memory, and ironing out some of the sweaty ad-libbing which made the original game so compelling. But PomPom's real skill still lurks in the counterpoint between clinically implemented play mechanics and brilliantly squeamish visual design.

And from the door-opening animations to a carefully implemented time limit that combats lurking, every part of the game reeks of thought and attention. Every new beastie is a joy to watch as well as study, and few other titles' enemies have the power to flood you with real horror as they scramble and skitter towards you.

Daringly different and reassuringly familiar by turn, *Mutant Storm Empire*, like *Space Giraffe*, embodies everything XBLA has promised as a platform. Among the ports and the conservative updates, it's a confident, inventive and charmingly deranged voice which shows that PomPom is having little trouble carving out a slobbering, slithering niche to call its own. **[8]**



One of the few Achievements that actually feels like an achievement, the Blackbelt Grandmaster, awarded for completing all 16 levels on Black Belt setting in one go, makes a tantalising return



***Mutant Storm*'s attitude to death has undergone a drastic revision. No longer a showstopper, all your lives are actually restored between levels**



The combo system jolts multiplayer to life in a frenzy of one-upmanship. While it's possible to hijack your rival's bonus, a well-timed shot taking out a final essential target is far more satisfying



GUITAR HERO III: LEGENDS OF ROCK

FORMAT: 360, MAC, PC, PS2, PS3 (VERSION TESTED), Wii
PRICE: £25 (£70 WITH CONTROLLER) RELEASE: NOVEMBER 23
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION DEVELOPER: ASPYR MEDIA (MAC, PC), NEVERSOFT (360, PS2, PS3), VICARIOUS VISIONS (Wii)





Axel Steel and the gang are all here – although the female characters have been carefully and tastelessly objectified. Still, if you like strippers, this'll do it

Guitar Hero III's development has been overshadowed by *Rock Band*. While Harmonix ups the ante in the most obvious fashion by increasing the number of players, *Guitar Hero III* has stuck to refining the formula that has seen such success, and could be seen as less of a progression than a plateau. But that's no bad thing when the template is so good – right?

Maybe. The most important aspect of the game, timing, is half-right. The notes move down the screen as always and respond accurately to your 'strumming', creating the illusion of musical competence. But it's hard to feel that their placement always corresponds as tightly to the songs as in the previous games, and a large number of the songs' layouts are annoyingly repetitious. *Guitar Hero* has one of the most intuitive and subtle control systems of any game, but here it becomes increasingly subservient to making the game – yes – rock hard, and for the average player will often descend into button-mashing.

The tracklisting is mixed: there are cast-iron classics, as well as several bad cover versions (notably a charmlessly polished rendition of She Bangs the Drums). The 'boss battles' are diverting, but ultimately the note-twiddling and power-ups feel too focused on posturing. In twoplayer mode, however, the new powers do add a frisson.

But for all that *Guitar Hero III* feels like the poor player in the rhythm-action wars, it's not a poor game, and still has some standout moments. It's a decent package built on solid fundamentals, and if it can't hold a candle to its predecessors then that's no great criticism: few games can. **[6]**



Animation is significantly improved over *Guitar Hero II*'s, with lip-synching gaining a particular boost. The PS3 and 360 iterations retain the PS2's version's ugly, jumbo-pixel audiences, however



BEOWULF

FORMAT: 360, PC, PSP, PS3
PRICE: £50 (360), £35 (PC), £30 (PSP), £40 (PS3)
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: TIWAK





The majority of puzzles, such as they are, involve fighting off a bundle of enemies and using lulls to close a cave entrance or open a gate

Beowulf is a fascinating case study: pride and power intermingled with heroism and a bestial roar, a solitary warrior against a background of kinship, and glory's defiance in the face of death. Ubisoft's *Beowulf* decides to concentrate on disentangling this core dichotomy of heroism and carnality by judging your actions in a binary fashion – which manages to both miss the point of the poem, and prove a disappointingly flawed system. *Beowulf* isn't a disaster, however, it's simply a fairly standard game in a genre overflowing with quality.

It's built around the combat, which is brutal, gory, and in carnal rage mode can be shockingly vicious – this can be charged independently, but is also boosted when Beowulf is hurt, and makes quick work of any foe in the game, including bosses. Beowulf is no respecter of the distinctions between enemy and ally when in this state of heightened power, and injudicious use will see you unwittingly pummelling and crushing your own soldiers.

Conversely, keeping your troops alive may take a little longer but is its own reward – or it would be if they didn't respawn after each encounter. Guiding them is done through a rhythm minigame which is relatively short, but can be frustrating, and their abilities without it are severely limited.

From strange 'interactive' sections in the Danish throne room, cycling through personalities and buying goodies, to moments when he has his fist jammed in a troll's throat, *Beowulf* is a diverse muddle. But while it's not exactly a bad game to play, it's hardly a good one either. **[5]**



Options present themselves when you grab an enemy, but many of the animations take too long to play out and render the moves a bit pointless



NEED FOR SPEED PROSTREET

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS2, PS3, PSP
PRICE: £50 (360, PS3), £40 (PS2), £35 (PSP), £30 (PC)
RELEASE: NOVEMBER 23 PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Race meetings are won once certain points are achieved, but you can continue competing so as to 'dominate' the event and get extra, better bonuses

So habitual has the autumnal arrival of the *Need For Speed* brand become that Christmas without it would feel as inconceivable as an absence of gluttony. Although, like that particular festive tradition, a hiatus wouldn't exactly be undesirable – a notion to which this latest instalment lends considerable weight.

ProStreet focuses on the world of legal street racing, which rather than involving police-sanctioned routes mapped out through your local neighbourhood actually takes the form of organised events in a controlled environment. And once you find yourself on an disused international airfield, say, expect a variety of vehicular activity, with drag, time-trial and speed challenges complementing standard race affairs.

The meetings themselves are well realised, with the developer putting considerable effort into evoking the right kind of atmosphere. Exceptional presentation from EA is hardly a revelation, of course, but here it's a package whose spell is broken only by loading screens.

However, what appears at the other end of such interruptions can go one of two ways. If it's a drag race, it's difficult not to get sucked into the intensity of the moment: performing well during the burnout phase minigame (so as to properly heat up the tyres) before launching into a world measured in a handful of seconds and where a tenth or even a hundredth can make all the difference.



Damage plays a big part in the game, and can result in costly repairs or even end your race, instilling a decent additional sense of pressure

If it's anything else, prepare for disappointment. EA may boast about its revised handling mechanic, but even on 'King' – the hardest setting of three where the easiest effectively brakes and almost steers for you – and with traction and stability control off, the driving is remarkably unchallenging. Things do at least feel different depending on the vehicle (from a reasonably exciting – if familiar – selection) whose wheel you're at but there is simply little connection ever felt with the tarmac. Throw some wildly erratic AI competition and a counterintuitive tuning dynamic into the equation and you're not left with a winning combination.

So what keeps you playing? Well, the structure and progression is actually well paced and thought out, while elements such as Sector Shootout, where cars compete to post the fastest time for each of the four segments of a track in exchange for points, are relatively captivating.

But eventually even those will lose their appeal, and *ProStreet* will be ejected from the console in favour of something more accomplished. Of course, that won't necessarily stop it from rampaging its way to the top of the Christmas charts. **[6]**



With a shift from boosting to battling, EA's first Burnout saw Criterion tear up its highway code

Racing games are all about driving well. *Burnout 3: Takedown* is all about driving badly. But driving badly well. Confused? Try doing it at 159mph.

Because it's at those speeds that most other racers reach into the zone: the tracksides and lens flare drop away, the shiny paint detailings fade to nothing, and the racing line, that single half-seen glimmer of silver, drags you instinctively forward.

You won't find that kind of zone in *Takedown*. There is no moment when the foreground dissolves and the game offers itself up to the horizon. There is no retreat from here and now, no escape from paying absolute attention. And, most of the time, there is no racing line, either.

Instead, there's carnage: brutal and crunching, a series of comical victories and desperate failures yanking you forever away from your blue-sky plans for how best to take the next corner, and back into the absolute present and that enemy who's trying to ram you through a barn. This is blood-on-the-steering-wheel territory – a game about combat as much as cornering, about manhandling as much as car handling. There's no zone here because that's the realm of those other, more polite titles, the *OutRuns* and *Ridge Racers*, where competitors' cars are really just hurdles to pass on your way around the track. In *Takedown* you don't have competitors, you have genuine enemies, and they're willing to fight back – often with surprisingly human viciousness. So when *Takedown*'s brand of anti-driving clicks into place, it doesn't send you inwards, to the world of unthinking instinct, but outwards, to a bubbling chemistry set of impromptu violence.

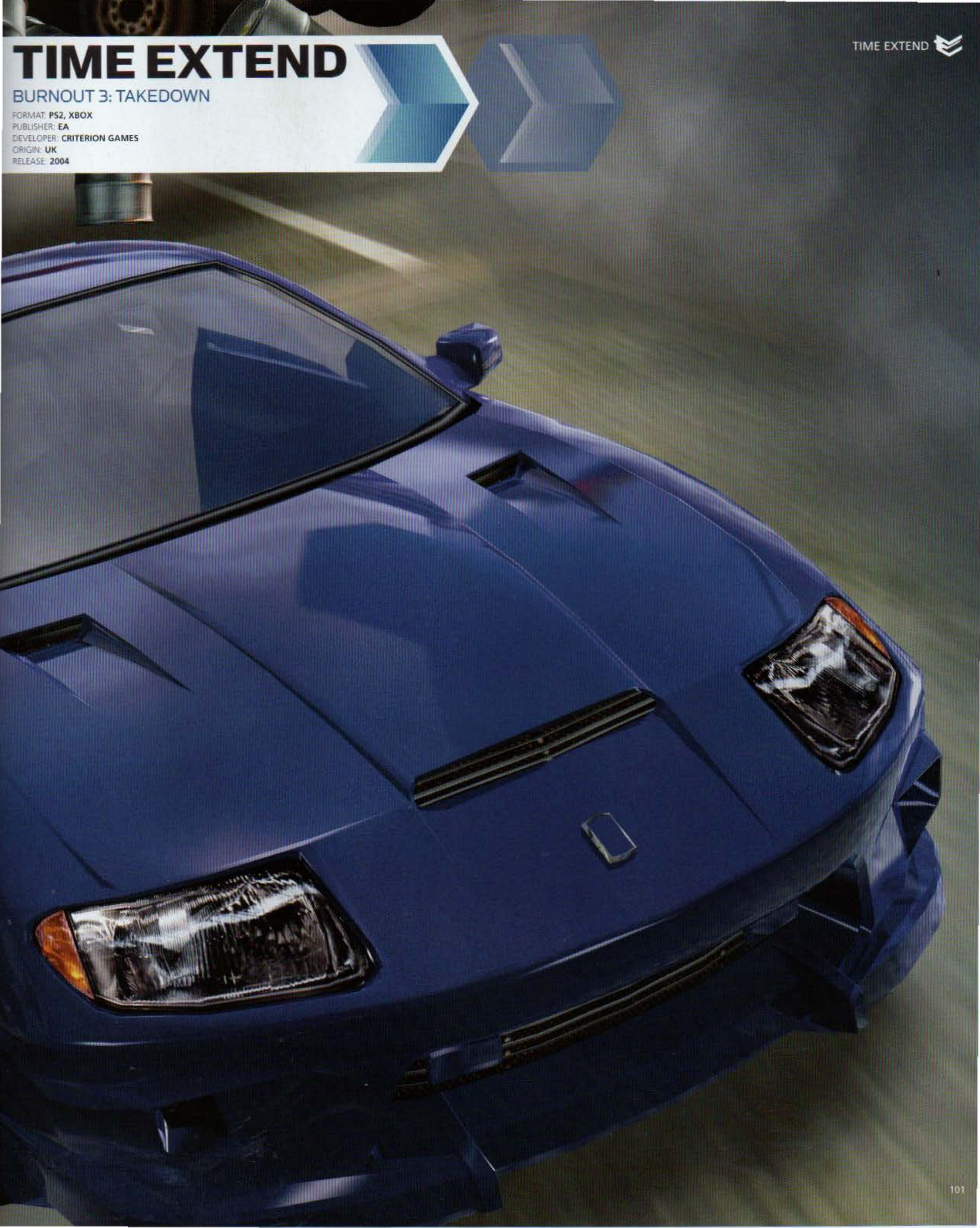
In Takedown you don't have competitors, you have genuine enemies, and they're willing to fight back – often with surprisingly human viciousness

Car games had done violence before, but they always needed machine guns and rockets bolted on to the chassis to make sense of it all. In such games, tracks inevitably gave way to arenas, and the results were often muddy compromises –

TIME EXTEND

BURNOUT 3: TAKEDOWN

FORMAT: **PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **CRITERION GAMES**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **2004**







CRASS FM

Fans who feared EA might put a permanent dent in Criterion's crumple zone could at least be disgusted at the inclusion of Crash FM, an aggressively unappealing faux radio station that intrudes into *Takedown*'s headspace a little too often. Playing the usual roster of hits and misses, it's fronted by a certain DJ Striker, babbling high-speed inanities in a friendsome tone that suggests that he's one terrible nanosecond away from inviting you to the worst kegger party in the history of the universe. Happily, he can't be heard in Impact Time.



demolition derbies that never seemed totally clear on which road they should be taking. *Takedown*'s blend of conventional finish-line racing and target-beating organic combat was a revolution of sorts, a broadening of the racing genre that managed not to be a dilution. It was a great achievement, particularly given that *Takedown* was the third game in a near-yearly series. Although recent titles suggest it may no longer be the case, the law of diminishing returns still argues that by a series' third outing, it's meant to be flagging, spent, with – unless it's a Mario or a Master Chief – the golden days of iconoclasm and innovation a distant memory. When most series get to this age, design is all about the trudge – the snail-slow iteration of old ideas, developers pacing themselves to make sure some tiny mundane minutiae remain unexplored to justify the dreaded somnambulist zombie that will be the inevitable game number four. Add to that the controversial new partnership with EA, which had fans fearing a favourite series was about to be buried alive under Trax and Tiger Woods, and *Takedown*'s realisation suddenly seems nothing short of miraculous. What happened?

It wasn't just the Takedowns themselves. The ability to barge other cars off the road certainly raised *Burnout*'s blood temperature, but it alone couldn't keep it up there. The key to it all, in a strange kind of way, is generosity. But it's not generosity as it's usually pitched to gamers. Compared to the 'new tracks and new cars' approach of most sequels, *Takedown* was not afraid to play with the underlying rule-set at the series' heart and make it a little more giving. Rather than simply repainting the doors and adding a new cup holder, it popped the hood and started messing with the *Burnout* engine. And while the changes are often quite simple, they had the effect of fundamentally altering the game.

The main area of attack – and one that many developers have been undone by over the years – was a broad retilting of the series' risks and rewards. They lie at the centre of every game, from Go to *GunValkyrie* – to a large degree, it's all that games actually are – and it's a hazardous area to fiddle with because it's a relationship rather than a mechanic, with all the flighty unpredictability that word can suggest. The first *Burnout*s proved themselves skilfully cautious operators on this front, the central conceit being that prolonged risk-taking – driving in the wrong lane, chaining near misses, power-sliding – would slowly fill up the boost bar, which, when topped out, would allow for a short burst of intense speed. It was a lot of reward, but only after a lot of risk.

Takedown took this careful balance and put it through the blender, asking what would happen if you made almost everything in the game rewarding. That meant giving you immediate access to boost as and when you started to earn it. The boost bar itself was no longer a sedate block of colour, becoming a flaming tyre track in constant flux. Such Hell's Angels attitudinal posturing would be unbearable in other games, but in *Takedown* it suggests a freewheeling spirit which genuinely permeates to the level of gameplay. After teasing





You never forget your first Takedown – the surprise of seeing a rival not just relegated to second place, but smashed to pieces against a pillar or passing truck







Burnout's world has always been dehumanised – no pedestrians wander its streets, and the restaurant tables lining the avenues are only there to be ploughed through



you with rewards so mercilessly in the first two titles, *Takedown* was giving you everything. The loss in delicate strategy is more than made up for in the access to immediate mayhem – a clear indicator of a game that had more time for sensation than thought. In the workaday world of most titles, it's a refreshing and astonishing change, and its ramifications are seen throughout the game.

And there was more generosity to come in the form of Aftertouch. If with boost Criterion decided that earning powers was not as much fun as utilising them, Aftertouch – the ability, once crashing, to enter slow-motion and steer your wreckage into the path of oncoming cars – shows similar clear thinking. In the various race modes, it takes the moments at which you traditionally feel most helpless and turns them into something that's exciting and tactical. In Crash mode – *Burnout 2*'s happy experiment from which so many of *Takedown*'s ideas come – Aftertouch is a total revolution, the real game starting at precisely the moment at which it had previously ended.

Aftertouch takes the moments at which you traditionally feel most helpless and turns them into something that's exciting and tactical

Throughout the whole package, Criterion showed a titanium determination to strip away everything that denies instant gratification – from the way you're thrown into races already doing 50, to the manner in which Aftertouch Takedowns allow you to retain your boost bar. It may also be why the game fails to appeal to many pure racing fans – they balk at Criterion's refusal to include a stick with the carrot, which others take as a move toward enjoying mistakes as well as learning from them.

That's not to say that *Takedown* is a pushover. If players wanted to work for their entertainment, they could set about the elaborate unlocking campaign. And then, of course, there's always that deranged AI, ramped up to fiercely competitive levels: aggressive, unforgiving, and most of all, highly personal in its attacks. The new rewards Criterion were so adamant about creating required new risks: Takedowns, boost and Aftertouch were empowering, but could have made the game too easy, so the AI was powered up as a way not just of balancing those changes, but of bringing them to the surface.

It's this brand new relationship that created *Takedown*'s signature carnage, the line-ruining chaos that erupts early and defines each race. It's this that turns each lap into a never-repeated series of minute-by-minute set-pieces and made newcomer Road Rage the star of the show.

In the context of the series, *Takedown* stands at a pivotal moment – the racing of the first two games was altered, certainly, but still as much of a presence as the battling that would increasingly define the next title. It's strange that a game built on such a blueprint for chaos should be so balanced, but as *Revenge* and later *Dominator* proved, taking the series too far in either direction could undermine and dilute a lot of *Takedown*'s achievements. *Revenge*'s traffic-checking could prove almost too intoxicating, and *Dominator* feels like a retreat for a series which previously seemed so confident with its forward momentum.

And after the flames have gone out, the wrecks have come to a stop and the sparks have stopped flying, there's something else that makes *Takedown* stand out. It's Criterion's confidence: the freedom it felt in experimenting with the most basic elements of the game, taking ideas which had been half-suggested in side-modes within one title and promoting them to major features in the next. This is no tinkering with the unimportant details, changing the title-screen picture and slapping on a new car class. It's bold, imaginative experimentation, as likely to end in tragedy as triumph. Few games manage to mark themselves out from their earlier incarnations while still feeling uniquely related to them. Few games that change so much remain so robust. And few games give you the sense that, beneath the explosions and skids, you can almost hear the developers thinking aloud.



LAGOUT

Takedown's online features, supported on both Xbox and PS2 versions, were a pleasant addition, and yet hardly life-altering. Both could suffer from considerable lag, occasionally making cars ghost out of vision before popping back into view, Quantum Leap-style, or sprinkling sudden dustings of bent traffic cones across the road. More often, the Live version suffered, naturally, from the fact that everyone was more interested in playing *Halo 2*. It was left for *Revenge*, with its grudge-enflaming rivalry system, to truly bring things together, and *Burnout Paradise* suggests the kind of sweeping changes fans should be used to by now.





Elastic AI is sensitively applied, making sure that you're never without someone to shunt through a nearby barn, but ensuring you're not unfairly pipped to the finish line by a soundly vanquished adversary



THE MAKING OF... PEGGLE

Casual gaming's belle de jour has wooed the hardcore market, too. And all thanks to a pachinko addiction...

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **POPCAP GAMES** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE: **2007**

The Japanese obsession with pachinko, pinball's curious and seemingly ruleless cousin, seems inexplicable to most westerners. A tourist's curiosity, these bright, clattering machines are inscrutably foreign in both form and function, sharing few of the rules, risks and rewards of traditional videogames. The same could perhaps be said of *Peggle*, a game that also sees its players' success or failure resting on a curious balance of chance and design.

It's not an unfair comparison, as the game's producer and PopCap studio director, **Sukhbir Sidhu**, admits: "I played an imported pachinko game back in the late 1990s and became very addicted. Following this I wanted to try and create a videogame based upon similar principals that elicited similar emotions. But pachinko is purely luck-based and so it doesn't translate well to a PC-based videogame. As a result the idea got pushed to the back of my mind. It wasn't until I came to PopCap and saw that one of the coders, Brian Rothstein, had created a 2D physics engine that was perfect for this style of game, that the vision was rekindled."

For the first five months of development Sidhu and Rothstein worked alone on the game. Later in the project's two-year lifespan, lead artist Walter Wilson, background artist Marcia Broderick and finally a second coder, Eric Tams, bolstered the team. The game clearly benefited from PopCap's studio policy of loose deadlines and emergent development, as company co-founder **John Vechey** explains: "PopCap doesn't believe in releasing a game until it's ready. And if it's never deemed 'ready', then it's never released. The loose deadlines are necessary to maintain our quality bar. And while this may sound like a wonderful world of idyllic pan-flute-playing fairies, it's actually much harder to make games without deadlines. You're constantly second-guessing the choices, trying to add more features – and you never really feel like it's done."

"PopCap doesn't release a game until it's ready. While this may sound wonderful, it's harder to make games without deadlines"

Sidhu had previously worked on internal PopCap titles *Astropop*, *Insaniquarium* and *Typer Shark* as well as having design input on a raft of titles the company publishes. With encouragement from PopCap co-founder John Vechey, Sidhu began working on a game design that combined elements of pachinko with those of classic Atari title *Breakout*. "There were obviously a lot of directions the game could have gone," says Sidhu, "so the biggest initial challenge was narrowing it down to a simple, compelling and fun mechanic. It took a while, but we were prepared for that.

"Initially all of the levels we created were either too fast-paced – using the typical non-stop ball shooting that you would see in pachinko – or too demanding. So we started simplifying. Brian made



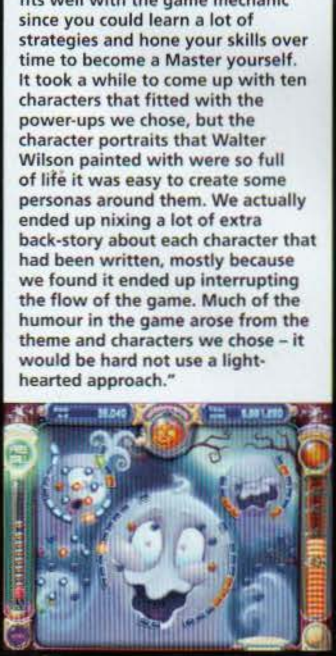
The game's ten different playable characters include such memorable names as Bjorn the Unicorn (pictured), Jimmy Lightning the Beaver and Lord Cinderbottom the Dragon





UNICORN CHASER

The tongue-in-cheek, boiled-sweet palette and cutesy character designs wasn't the first look the team created for the game. "We originally thought we might have just one character, and use different types of pegs to represent each power-up," explains Vechey. "At the same time, we were struggling for a theme, and it was really hard to come up with something we thought would tie the game together. The idea of the kung-fu school metaphor came up over beers at a local pub. This fits well with the game mechanic since you could learn a lot of strategies and hone your skills over time to become a Master yourself. It took a while to come up with ten characters that fitted with the power-ups we chose, but the character portraits that Walter Wilson painted with were so full of life it was easy to create some personas around them. We actually ended up nixing a lot of extra back-story about each character that had been written, mostly because we found it ended up interrupting the flow of the game. Much of the humour in the game arose from the theme and characters we chose – it would be hard not use a light-hearted approach."



a level that had 100 rotating crosses, which all had to be hit with the ball and cleared. This seemed to be the right direction – it was a lot of fun, addictive and replayable but was ultimately still too frustrating. Over the following weeks or so this idea was distilled down to a field of static round pegs. This allowed for a more predictable bounce which worked so well we finally decided to just use a subset of randomly selected orange target pegs in amongst all of the others to help balance levels and ease some of the frustration of getting the last peg."

"We just added more and more craziness. Just when we thought it was already too over the top, we'd think of something else"

Indeed, in the early days of *Peggle*'s development, others at the company didn't share Sidhu's unflinching belief in the concept. "Once we had the core idea in place we came under a lot of scrutiny from the rest of the studio," he explains. "In the game the player just aims the ball and clicks to unleash it before sitting back to watch the consequences of their actions; there isn't really any interaction beyond that. Some people didn't like that, so we were constantly defending against requests for more interaction. But by then we were confident enough in our vision for the game that we weren't tempted to change it."

Vechey agrees: "*Peggle* underwent an interesting creative process. Sidhu and Rothstein kept having new ideas for things to try. They actually holed up a little bit and would work on different ideas for a couple months, then show people in bigger increments. There were some people that weren't sure a great game was going to come of it. It was stressful at that point in the project; you've been putting your heart and soul into this thing, there's never fully a right answer, and everyone has good – and bad – ideas for it."

According to Vechey, after the core concept had been nailed down and the rest of the studio had bought into the game, it wasn't long until *Peggle* was in a releasable state: "We could have technically shipped the same game a year earlier, but we decided to put the extra production time into the audiovisuals and the hand-painted backdrops." One of the game elements that benefited from this extra time investment is also one of its defining moments. Extreme Fever mode, a rattling jackpot display of audiovisual payoff, plays out for the few seconds before the player's ball hits the final orange peg to clear the level. It is some spectacle for a puzzle game: Beethoven's Ode to Joy blares forth and the camera zooms in while the final few millimetres of the ball's trajectory play out in slow motion. "We've seen lots of people literally jump for joy the first time they win a level," enthuses Sidhu. "Originally, I envisioned something more akin to the wild sounds and visuals that I'd seen in pachinko machines – they were crazy but felt really positive and rewarding, not surprising considering pachinko is a gambling game.

"Since it was important not to distract the player from watching the actual shot they made, the only real place to jam in nonsensical pachinko-style craziness was the end of the level. We started with just the words 'Extreme Fever' in giant letters, and Brian added Ode to Joy. At first, these were just jokingly added as placeholders, but people who played seemed to react well, so we just added more and more over the course of development. Just when we thought it was already too over the top, we'd think of something else."

The game has gone on to become one of just a handful of casual PC web-based titles that have managed to penetrate deep into the consciousness of the hardcore gameplaying public. Nevertheless, its mechanics have attracted criticism from those who assert that it's nothing more than a game of pure chance. "Luck is certainly a big part of the charm of *Peggle*, but it's not entirely luck-based," counters Sidhu. "There's a lot of depth to *Peggle*'s gameplay that isn't really obvious to begin with. As you progress further in









When all the orange pegs have been cleared, five bonus slots appear in the gutter at the bottom of the play area. Usually the slots offer 10,000, 50,000 and 100,000 points respectively but, if a player manages to clear every peg, they are all worth the maximum



the main Adventure mode, the levels get harder and do require skill, precision, forward planning and timing. Mastering Adventure mode basically prepares players for Challenge mode: 75 minigames that are all variants on the basic gameplay. Some of these require you to choose the right power-up, or time your shot so you can get a ricochet into the free ball bucket, or earn extra points by getting style shots. I'd like to see critics complete the *Peggle* challenges and still call it a game of chance!"

The game's initial sales were slow. "Most casual games' sales peak out within the first couple of weeks, and within three months are pretty much zero," explains Vechey. "*Peggle* didn't come out with a giant level of sales, but is doing something that few casual games do: continuing to sell while increasing sales." A crucial catalyst for the game's success among core gamers has been the promotion it's enjoyed from *Half-Life* developer Valve. "One of our coders, Eric Tams, had friends at Valve and heard *Peggle* was all the rage at their office," Sidhu explains. "We even got a few emails from Valve staffers pleading for tips on beating some of the more difficult challenges. At the same time, we were hearing anecdotal evidence that, while there were a lot of hardcore gamers getting into *Peggle*, there were plenty who said they'd never be caught dead playing a game with unicorns and rainbows.

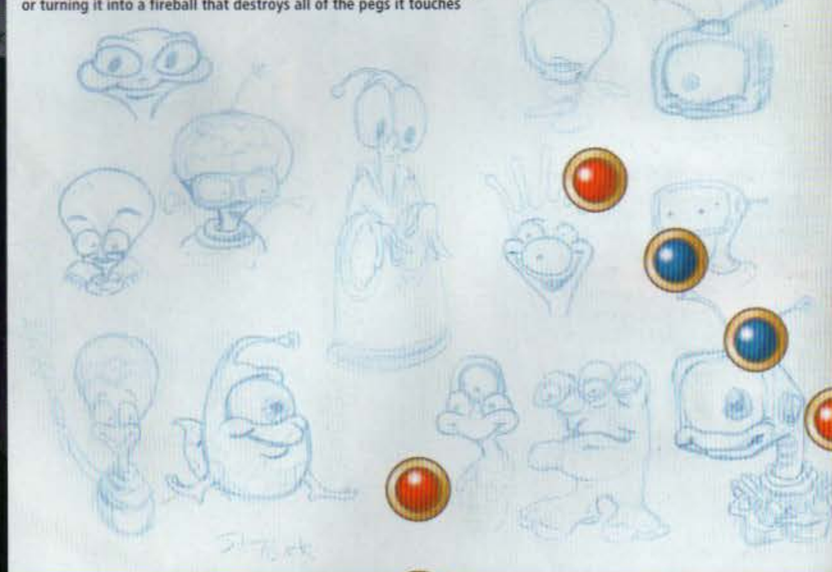
"Valve had been a great partner for PopCap and they had done a lot to promote *Peggle* on Steam, just because they liked the game. We thought that was cool, and really believed that if hardcore gamers could get over the visual hurdle and actually play the game, many would enjoy it. The theme had always been tongue-in-cheek for us anyway, though obviously it doesn't come across that way to everyone. We proposed the idea of a special free version for Steam players, using our characters in *Half-Life 2* themed backdrops, figuring no one could resist a game with a gun-toting unicorn. Valve loved the idea, gave us tons of art and sound assets, free artist time, and helped get *Peggle* in front of many who would never have played it otherwise."

With such a broad player-base, clips of impressive shots have spread across the internet like wildfire, in no small part thanks to the game's ingenious ability to send short clips directly over email from within the game. "We get people sending in replay files of their high-scoring shots all the time," says Sidhu. "We got a few impressive one-million-plus shot replays, then one day someone sent in a mind-blowing 4.2 million point shot replay. I like the way that both luck and skill are combined. One of the great things about *Peggle* is that on any given level, there are many different strategies you can employ to win – and things keep changing from one shot to the next as the peg layout changes. As the level clears out, then more skill comes into play and that helps make replays varied and interesting, as no two games are alike."



While the object of the game is to eliminate all the orange pegs, wiping out blue pegs will earn bonus points, while hitting green pegs activates character-specific power-ups. An option for colour-blind gamers, who could otherwise be totally stumped by the game, adds symbols to each type to make them easily distinguishable

Each character boasts a different special ability, such as adding a *Puzzle Bobble*-esque dotted line to show your projectile's trajectory, or turning it into a fireball that destroys all of the pegs it touches



CLASSICALLY TRAINED

Peggle uses all manner of classical music themes, from Bach's Toccata to Grieg's Peer Gynt Suite. It's an unusual choice of soundtrack for any videogame, not least a casual PC title, but it undoubtedly serves the game well. "Ode to Joy was slapped in as placeholder music at first," explains Sidhu. "But at a certain point, we felt we had to use it since it worked so well. Both Brian and I are classical music fans so it seemed pretty natural to use the other pieces because they were very evocative and just seemed to fit perfectly."

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

■ **NAME:** Venom Games (part of 2K Games)

■ **DATE FOUNDED:** March 2003

■ **NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 30

■ **KEY STAFF:** Peter Johnson, studio head



■ **URL:** www.venomgames.co.uk

■ **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY**
Rocky Legends (PS2/Xbox, Ubisoft);
Prey (Xbox 360 version, 2K Games)







Venom's Xbox 360 port of *Prey* (top) looked good, but its currently unannounced game (above) makes more extensive use of today's console hardware



■ **LOCATION:**
Newcastle Upon Tyne

■ **CURRENT PROJECTS:**
A fighting game, plus other soon-to-be-announced projects

■ **ABOUT THE STUDIO**

"Venom Games is 2K Games' only UK-based development studio, having become a part of the Take Two group in 2005. We have spent the last few years developing our own technology to base our next-generation games on, and this is due to pay off next year with the launch of our first game based upon it, which we hope will bring some new ideas to the sports genre.

"We are a small company with big ideas – one advantage this brings is that everyone here in the studio has their own vital role to play in making the game a success, something which is becoming increasingly rare in the current development scene. Being publisher-owned brings security and stability, and the occasional surprising opportunity such as the 360 version of *Prey*, which was handled entirely within the studio, or playing our own small part in some of 2K's recent lineup of high-profile titles such as *BioShock*."





Studio head Peter Johnson has been making games since 1982

Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

Automatic city builders

New French middleware company Gamr7 promises to enable developers to build game cities at the touch of a button



Bernard Légaut, Gamr7 co-founder and business development director

www.gamr7.com

In a commercial environment where the price of physical products ranging from T-shirts to cars, airliners and skyscrapers is falling thanks to the combined effects of workflow efficiency, outsourcing and deep inter-company collaboration, it might seem strange that the cost of making games continues to rise.

Even average multi-platform budgets are hitting the $10 million (£4.8m) mark while the most high-profile games come in at more than twice as much. One of the main reasons is the explosion in the size of development teams which can routinely peak at more than a hundred staff. And despite the now commonplace use of tricks such as outsourcing, particularly in terms of art production, it's not a problem that's going away any time soon; at least not unless players stop caring about the quality of eye-candy or the number of hours of gameplay their £40 buys.

There are plenty of middleware and tools companies who think they have an answer, though: the procedural generation of art assets.

It's an approach that's been around for years. Early games such as *Elite* and *The Sentinel* used such techniques to make the most efficient use of limited system resources. A more recent resurgence was sparked when Sony hinted at its potential when announcing PlayStation 2's architecture. Games such as *World Rally Championship* and *SSX* went on to create their background terrains using procedural technology.

But much like the issues surrounding parallel programming (see Codeshop, **E**182), while the theory behind the procedural generation of art assets is relatively well understood, it's the reality that's proved the problem. Still, the idea that instead of artists directly designing, modelling and texturing the objects, textures and environments required for a game, they can work with flexible tools that enable them to broadly describe reference objects, with the procedural technology itself creating a range of different variants on that theme and hence significantly reducing the overall workload, remains attractive.

"The worlds game developers build are becoming too big. They are very time-consuming to create"

Successful examples such as IDV's procedural tree creation tool SpeedTree have proved that specialist technologies can quickly become industry-standard. The goal of the newest procedural pioneer is less organic, however.

"The worlds game developers build are becoming too big. They are very time consuming to create, especially when it comes to building cities because there are too many objects and too much detail. Currently, the only way to do it is to use an army of artists who take millions of photos, but that approach doesn't fit into every budget," explains



To date, the most successful piece of procedural middleware has been IDV's SpeedTree, shown here in *The Witcher*





Here shown building cities in contrasting styles, Gamr7's technology has been designed to enable artists to automatically create many different types of urban environments

Bernard Légaut, co-founder and business development director at French company Gamr7.

It was set up a year ago to work on specific middleware to enable artists to quickly design and create detailed urban environments. *SpeedCity*, anyone?

"These could be modern cities, futuristic cities or fantasy-based cities. It doesn't matter," Légaut points out. Indeed, rather charmingly, alongside examples of the technology creating versions of London and what looks like 22nd-century New York, there's also an example of a cutesy Smurf-based town.

As with all procedural creation, the trick is creating a flexible way to define how a city develops that is accessible both to human thinking and computer processing. In the case of Gamr7's city-building, it's based on the interactions of the road network and the urban activities people carry out.

"We are simulating the growth of a city through the meanings of the buildings," Légaut says. This means the system works out where to place buildings and hence the interconnecting roads and paths using a probability mesh that combines the various activities of the city's inhabitants with the physical location of the buildings themselves.

"In a city, people want to go shopping, to school, to hospital, to church, so you have different buildings related to these activities," says Légaut. "You can also define how different activities are linked, so that some buildings might need to be close to others, or set up specific zones, and the computer will automatically create buildings and roads to fulfil your design." Watching the simulation run is a somewhat eerie sight, as a network of roads is slowly and seemingly randomly created from nothing, the gaps in between filling up with buildings.



Procedural city generation tools won't ever replace the expensive, time-consuming efforts required to make games such as *The Getaway* and *PGR*, but they may make it quicker and cheaper for developers who don't need to ape realism



Of course, creating this sort of system is only half the battle. What's much more likely to define Gamr7's eventual failure or success is the quality and flexibility of tools provided for artists. At present, there are two separate editors: one for setting up the basic parameters of the city, the other for the graphical and positional set-up of the buildings themselves. Currently, work is going on to integrate these into a coherent whole. After this, the procedural theme will be extended with the option of a procedural building system to ensure that the city will be populated with differently designed and styled buildings.

"What we will do is let the artist make a few buildings and then tag them, saying: 'This is a door, this is a window'," says Légaut. "We'll then automatically create a range of variations and then the artist will tell us: 'This version is OK, but this is too much', so there will be a process to teach the computer how to make the sort of buildings you require for your game."

And, in time, Légaut hopes the Gamr7 engine will be extended into a realtime component that can create different city environments every time you start a new game. It's the sort of thing that, as well as being a strong technical challenge, would also require game designers to rethink the way they work. That remains a long way off, though. Currently, the company is just offering the first version of its technology as a service that developers can use in conjunction with Gamr7's staff. It's hoping to have the first version available as a standalone product by the summer of 2008.

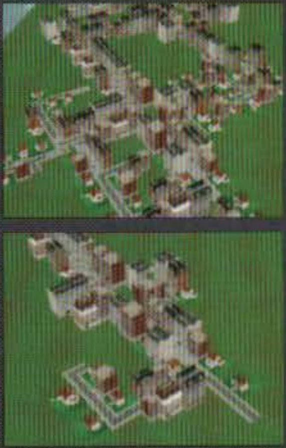
"We've been talking to a lot of people," Légaut says. "Most of them tell us it's a great idea. Of course, they're all waiting to see something that's better packaged, but they tell us if it works, they will use it – it's so much easier than trying to build a city yourself."



Another French company working on procedural technology – in this case textures – is Allegorithmic. Here its ProFX engine is shown working within Unreal Engine 3

The French connection

Gamr7 isn't the only French company exploring the potential of procedural technology for game development. Set up in 2003, Allegorithmic specialises in the creation of texture tools, with its ProFX engine being integrated into Unreal Engine 3 and the Gamebryo engine, as well as offered as part of Microsoft's XNA tools. Combined with the MapZone editing tool, the pair enable artists to build up textures, diffuse, specular and normal maps in their usual manner, but result in extremely lightweight assets in terms of their memory requirements. Indeed, Xbox Live Arcade title *RoboBlitz* was one of the first 3D titles on the platform; around 80 per cent of textures for the 19-level game were generated at runtime, this being the only way it could fit into the then 50MB size limit.



Gamr7's technology sees buildings filling in the spaces around the main roads. The different activities that occur in the buildings then further define the pathways of smaller roads, which in turn define the positions of more buildings



BY N'GAI CROAL

PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

GAMEPLAY UBER ALLES

The peril of writing about the art of videogames (or the lack thereof) in a one-off print essay aimed at a general-interest audience that's presumably uneducated about the subject matter is that there isn't enough space for sufficient examples or fine distinctions. So one or two games must stand in for many, and broad strokes take the place of nuanced assessment. A further challenge is that when drawing analogies between videogames and other media – a time-honoured tactic for pulling in the uninitiated – some parallels that seem obviously accurate at first glance later break down under close scrutiny. That's why it's incumbent on us as writers to use the right analogy at the right time.

A good example of the challenges we scribes face is demonstrated by an op-ed that ran in the New York Times entitled The Play's the Thing. Written by Ronald Radosh in the wake of the *Halo 3* launch, the essay uses Bungie's magnum opus as a jumping-off point to weigh in on the 'are games art?' debate. The piece is more thoughtful and considered than most of its ilk. You'll find no intemperate Roger Ebert broadsides here. Yet it ultimately founders on its insistence on a seemingly inarguable point: that videogames are a storytelling medium whose potential is only being held back by their slavish imitation of film.

As Radosh writes: 'Many games now aspire to be 'cinematic' above all else. In *Halo 3*, as in most games, the plot is conveyed largely through short expositional movies that are interspersed throughout the action. These cutscenes undermine the sense of involvement – of play – that is games' authentic métier. Games have become a backward-looking medium. Because game designers rely on the language of cinema, they have not sufficiently developed a new form of storytelling based on the language of videogames'.

It's understandable that Radosh would go after cutscenes. After all, developers and gamers alike are profoundly ambivalent about their role. If, as the film director Howard Hawk once said, a good movie consists of three great scenes and no bad ones, while most games have multiple mediocre-to-terrible scenes and few if any great ones, is it any wonder that story-based games struggle to be seen as art? That's partially why I'm sympathetic to Radosh's subsequent statement: 'The games that come closest to achieving artistry tend to be non-narrative: manipulable abstractions of light and sound, whimsical virtual toys or puzzle adventures that subvert the gamer's sense of space, time and physics', because I've often felt that way about certain games with a minimalist narrative like *Rez*, *Ico* and the recently released *Portal*.

> We don't fault paintings for not telling stories as well as comic books, or photography for not telling a story as well as television

Still, Radosh makes a fundamental error in assuming that the art in story-based videogames lies in their narratives. The function of a game is not to tell a story, but rather to simulate an experience in which narrative elements are merely a single element. *Halo 3* is more akin to the combat sequences in Saving Private Ryan, except rather than watch Tom Hanks or Tom Sizemore make the moment-to-moment decisions, we get to experience an abstraction of combat wherein we can make those moment-to-moment decisions ourselves. That's where *Halo 3*'s art resides. As Will Wright said yet again during his BAFTA Video Games Lecture in October, the focus of linear stories is empathy, while the focus of interactive media is agency. We don't fault paintings for not telling stories as well as comic books, or dance for not telling stories as well as theatre, or photography for not telling a story as well as television. Instead, we judge each medium on its own merits. Yet because games have come to look like movies, and because developers have borrowed some cinematic techniques, some would weigh the two side by side and find games wanting. This is a mistake.

To define *Halo 3* as 'not art' on the basis of a story not well told would be like faulting the movie Silence Of The Lambs for not capturing the interior lives of its characters as well as the novel did. Movies simply don't handle subjectivity as well as do novels, despite the fact that there's an entire cinematic language built up around this: voiceover narration, point-of-view shots, slow motion, freeze frames, etc. (Perhaps the use of cutscenes in a videogame is similar to the way that voiceove narration is often used in film: an efficient way of communicating exposition and character before returning to the drama at hand.) It's also mistaken to assert that game designers have relied on the language of cinema rather than invent one of their own. After all, what are health bars, pickups, powerups, ammo counters damage indicators and inventory screens if not an iconographic language? But, unlike the visua language of cinema, it's there to support our agency rather than tell us a story.

And it is in that agency where we shall find the art of this medium.

N'Gai Croal writes about technology for Newsweek. His blog can be found at blog.newsweek.com/blogs/levelup/





BY RANDY SMITH

HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

TOEING THE DISASSEMBLY LINE

Something interesting has been going on in Ubisoft games these days: they don't have cutscenes. Occasionally they only allow camera rotation in an otherwise completely non-interactive vignette, which isn't exactly mind-blowing, and sure Valve has been on to this 'total immersion' thing since 1997, but Ubi releases a wide range of games so it really says something about the company's beliefs.

Imagine you've been working the disassembly line, taking apart different media to identify the pieces and figure out what makes them tick. You've nailed painting, sculpture and music, but now down the conveyor belt comes the trickiest one yet: film. Cracking it open, you find all these other art forms fraternising in there. Most notably, you've got theatre and photography, since you're taking pictures of people acting. And just in set design, for example, there's architecture, lighting, interior design, interpretive dance and animal husbandry (and maybe other stuff; I don't actually know). A film, you decide, is a giant sloppy orgy of art, but to your keen mind that seems like a red herring. You make the observation that it's not film unless it's being played back, because performed live it is theatre. This seems excruciatingly pedantic, and you feel terrible shame for having thought of it.

Until you realise that the distinction corresponds with a creative technique unique to cinema: editing the sequence in which the moving images are played back – cuts between shots, for example. Interestingly, it's also the technique that audiences had the most trouble with in film's early history. The jumps in continuity were a new thing that was scary and confounding. But audiences came around, in part because they learned the language of cinema; they learned that when a scene turned abruptly from night to day, it wasn't that history's fastest eclipse had been filmed but rather that the filmmaker was implying the passage of time. They also came around because when this technique was used effectively and deliberately by the best film artists it was crucial to creating works of art that could never exist in any other media.

> If we want to create great works of art that could not exist in any other media, we have to take risks and embrace our uniqueness

Now can we disassemble videogames? Can we even identify them? Common sense tells us that when you move the controller and watch the corresponding movement on screen and point somewhere between the two you're pointing at the videogame, right? To no one's surprise, you're pointing at interactivity, the distinct quality that sets us apart from any other medium. Interactivity is the act of some other medium changing in response to input from the audience. It's a loop of the audience perceiving the art and using their input to change to it, explore it, express what they would rather have it be.

Like film, games are an embarrassingly crowded jamboree of art forms. Inside you've got cinematography, animation, sculpture, graphic design and so on. But if it's not interactive, then it's not a videogame. That's why cutscenes are so weird, because no matter how seamlessly they are integrated, they are not our medium. It's as though you were at the movies when suddenly live actors walked on stage to perform a scene the director didn't know how to make work in film. No filmmaker would feel the need to do that, unless she was deliberately trying to be arty.

So why don't we do everything interactively One reason is because we are deliberately trying to be arty. Actually, no, we aren't. One reason is because we don't know how to represent in interaction the activity in the cutscene. We don't know how to support dialogue, so we depict it non-interactively instead. Another reason is that we don't want to take up too much space in the player's attention; we don't want them to have to learn the ostrich breeding system *and* the wakeboarding system, so one happens in cutscenes. Lastly, we feel the need t control the flow of information, for example to make sure the player doesn't miss that important clue about ostrich aphrodisiacs.

Sounds reasonable, but those are all indicators of a medium whose language is not established and whose audience (for example: you, me) is not yet comfortable with the new and scary distinct quality – interactivity. Cutscenes are like Dumbo's feather in reverse: they reinforce in our minds what games are and are not capable of. If Ubi and Valve are doing the fully interactive thing, then it's obviously possible, the techniques are there. We can criticise how they do it, but they are making progress on establishing the language of our medium. There is more than one reason these games will be seen as classics someday. If we want to figure out how to express practically anything and create great works of art that could not exist in any other media, we have to take these kinds of risks and embrace our uniqueness.

I mean, holy crap, we can now, in realtime, change art in response to input from the audience. What can we do with that?

Randy Smith is a lead game designer at EA's LA studio. His current project is a collaboration with Steven Spielberg





BY MR BIFFO

BIFFOVISION Grumble feature enabled

HYPED TO DEATH

The power of hype is a curious thing. It make a-one man a-weep, and another man a-sing. Despite my supposedly trademarked, clichéd, he's-running-it-into-the-ground-now grumpy old man persona, I'm not immune to hype myself. Indeed, way back in the waning years of the 20th century I can remember buying Def Leppard's Hysteria album off the back of being told it was some sort of important, pop cultural milestone, and then listening to it, and then punching myself around the face and testicles for being so gullible. We're all guilty of falling for hype. It's the same as the crowd buying into the Emperor's new clothes; none of us want to look stupid by saying we can see the big guy's floppy manparts, and none of us want to look as if we're missing out on something really great. We all buy the new iPod because, well, Johnny Neighbour has one, not because we need it to improve our lives.

> Big games are so forcibly rammed down our oesophagus that I end up resenting them because I tend to end up buying them

Presumably because it wobbles on an economic knife-edge most of the time, the games industry drives one of the biggest hypemobiles on the entertainment superhighway. I can't think of a film or a music release that has ever been subject to the same level of sustained, prerelease hysteria as the biggest games releases are treated to. Consequently, the big games are so forcibly rammed down our oesophagus that I end up resenting them. And I end up resenting them because I'm an idiot, and tend to end up buying them.

Case in point: *Halo 3*.

I'm sorry to everyone who likes it, and wants to sit in a tree k.i.s.s.i.n.g it, and touching its bottom, but I was really disappointed. And I was disappointed, in part, because I'd swallowed the hype. The in-our-face PR campaign had got coverage on the main BBC news bulletin, for flip's sake. The release of some stupid videogame was seemingly a newsworthy story on a par with British soldiers being killed in Afghanistan, Diddy David Cameron wibbling like a baby about something while Gordon Brown huffed and barked like he'd got a bulrush stuck in his throat, and someone being stabbed in the cheek with the end of a hose. How could I not buy it? This wasn't just a game. It was an event.

I mean, I didn't hate *Halo 3*. I just... I dunno... it was just sort of OK. A marked improvement on the tiresome *Halo 2*, certainly, but it sort of just consolidated what was good about its predecessors, and then made it look a bit prettier. I wasn't necessarily seeking innovation, but I admit that I had expected – nay, hoped – that the singleplayer campaign would've lasted longer than the two days of intermittent playing that it took me to complete it on the normal setting. I know that it's only half the picture, but having played *Halo 3* online I find it as intimidating and as frustrating as its predecessor; it's great fun if you're absolutely brilliant at it, but for the rest of us – if we can't find any friends to play against – we're screwed.

Perhaps the thing which annoys me the most about the entire *Halo* franchise is the way in which Bungie seems to think it has a work of high art on its hands. Or, at least, wants us to think that. Frankly, if you published *Halo*'s story alongside even the trashiest of sci-fi novels, it'd win every award for plop fiction that you've got going. If they just shoved the story in there, and didn't make such a big deal about it, it wouldn't stink up my throat as much as it does. Like (the admittedly far superior and more innovative) *BioShock* you can even buy it in a special box – the gaming equivalent of calling a packet of cheese and onion crisps 'le Parisienne fromage avec delicately pan-fried-shallot-flavour potato thins'. There's lots to like about *Halo 3*, and it's a great package overall, I just don't think it justifies three years of hype, getting on the main BBC news, and being released in a special tin.

At least there are occasions where hype doesn't work. Public relations is a balancing act and sometimes you can tip the wrong way. That's precisely what has happened with the PlayStation 3. The launch of the PS3 was deemed newsworthy by the BBC, yet it has all been downhill from there. The system has remained in public relations freefall pretty much for the whole of 2007, and it seems that nothing Sony does can stop it.

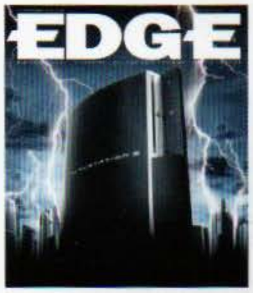
The level of negativity surrounding the PS3 is almost anti-hype. And, as with positive hype, not all of it is deserved. Don't get me wrong – even with its desperate new entry-level model there's no way I'm buying one of the wretched things. Release some decent games, Sony, and I might change my mind. But in the same way that everyone has apparently been brainwashed into believing that *Halo 3* is flawless, game-of-the-year material, the games-buying public now has an ingrained conviction that the PS3 is irredeemably awful.

Hype, PR, plugging, promotion, marketing, puffery – call it what you will, it's an arcane art that nobody truly understands, least of all the consumer. And that's just how they want to keep it. The cheeky monkeys.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television



Inbox



Issue 182

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: What makes a good review?

With a lot of recent talk of marks out of ten, bias, objectivity and so forth it seems as though many folk know what they don't like to see in a review. But what about the qualities that you do feel are important?
Player 1

A good review should be short and relevant. I'm not interested in reading self-indulgent lengthy prose, I just want to know how it plays. Everybody has different taste in games, so in addition to telling us how much he/she likes the games it's important for me to be able to get an understanding of whether I'm likely to agree. Comparisons to other games I may have played are useful, as is an indication of what kind of games the reviewer favours.
Bombfrog

Just a number in square brackets should suffice.
Weadre

I was fascinated to read The Making Of... *Tomb Raider: The Angel Of Darkness* (E182). We rarely get to read informed (and informative) analysis of those games that perhaps don't quite turn out as both their makers and their fans had hoped – especially not games coming from a huge global 'franchise' such as Ms Croft and company. This was a joy to read – so many of us must have wondered, time and again, how it is possible for talented, dedicated and well-intentioned artists, programmers, writers and producers to sometimes get it so completely wrong.

Although it must be said there is, of course, an element of the 'car crash' about reading such post-mortems, as your piece proved it can also be illuminating and offer the chance for some of those involved to speak out and provide some much-needed context. The *AOD* feature has been one of the best articles I've read in **Edge** for a long while and has reconfirmed my faith in your ability to 'go where other game journalists dare not' – and to win the confidence of those industry professionals willing to go on record with their valuable insights into how a project as huge as *AOD* can sadly find itself mired in setbacks, misdirection and ultimate failure.

Bravo. Sometimes taking a few careful moments to look back at such unhappy videogame moments can be both entertaining and educational. It certainly makes a very welcome change from the relentless PR and marketing hype for every other game. I'm sure many of us can think of other games that have crashed and burned just as spectacularly as *AOD* and behind each unhappy incident there is a story to be told.

I have such a lot of respect for game developers – these are talented, highly skilled and creative individuals. They deserve, at the very least, a chance to put forward their side of the experience when things go wrong. I felt extremely sorry for Core when *AOD* failed. I don't believe anyone – ever – sets out to make a 'bad' game, but sometimes (as your feature demonstrated) events just conspire to undermine every best effort and good intention.

I have such a lot of respect for game developers – they deserve a chance to put forward their side of the experience when things go wrong

May I suggest a future candidate be *Two Worlds*? This game still has me scratching my head. You can see the ambition, the scope, the time and the effort... and yet so much about the game emerges as broken, or simply not finished. I still give the developers of the title the benefit of the doubt – but I would dearly like to hear their thoughts on the project and how they now feel about the game that was finally pushed out of the door.
Phil Ford

It would indeed be fascinating to know the story behind *Two Worlds*, but we may have to wait for that one since only the passage of time tends to loosen tongues enough for the kind of disclosure we're talking about.

Why are games marked down for linearity? Everyone has enjoyed themselves in *Grand Theft Auto* (or one of the numerous knock-offs), with god mode on, every-weapon cheats and a tank, driving around the city and making it your own. But can a game truly keep you enthralled to the end with such gameplay?

The games of the last few years that I enjoyed the most aren't the ones that I ran around randomly blowing up cars and buildings, but are the ones that I found interesting because of characters and situations that open-ended games simply can't offer. Would *Half-Life 2* have benefited if City 17 was open for Gordon Freeman to run around aimlessly in, instead of being strictly forced to follow set paths caused by the oppressive Combine? Would Rapture have been as memorable and enthralling if everything was immediately open to you, the most powerful plasmids available to you from the start of the game if you just explored, finding every nook and cranny before handling any of the exposition?

These games benefited because of excellent pacing, interesting storytelling and a sense of purpose. Sure, a sandbox-style game can be fun, but do we really need to look down our noses at those games which try to tell us a story simply because they have their limitations?
Glenn Duncan



The best letter wins a DS Lite

Rest assured, we don't perceive linearity as a bad thing by default. And are we imagining it, or does the sandbox bandwagon seem to be slowing down, anyway? (There certainly won't be too many on your new DS.)

I can't be alone in my amazement at a second 10/10 review in as many months. I can only imagine the excitement the arrival of both games has generated among the **Edge** staff, being absorbed in the mundane, everyday aspects of the videogame industry, as opposed to occasional dabblers like myself who are too busy to sample anything other than the highlights the industry offers. The event gave me pause for thought, as I think the dual release of *Halo 3* and *The Orange Box* could be a sign of things to come.

If Valve and Bungie have their way, are we on the cusp of a new level of generosity and value for money for gamers? Not only offering exquisite graphics and sound, but great depth of story and mechanics, and online extras like multiplayer and DLC. Never before have games looked so keen to create their own centre in people's lives. Perhaps only now, with the help of the internet, they can succeed.

If the next 10/10 game (*MGS4*?) comes along in the next year, will **Edge** be forced to up its expectations? Is the bar being irrevocably raised? Perhaps this is the true meaning of next-gen.
Andrew Hodgson

You're not alone in your amazement – although others have expressed their feelings... differently. What's going to happen now we've reviewed *Galaxy*? If only such great games weren't made...



Making the *Half-Life 2* series less linear to create a sort of *GTA: City 17* may seem interesting, but would it, asks Glenn Duncan, really improve the gaming experience?

Never before have games looked so keen to create their own centre in people's lives. Perhaps only now, with the help of the internet, they can succeed

After being sucker-punched by the 1080p circus, I've spent the last eight months in what can only be described as a gaming vacuum. I will explain. I purchased a Wii when it was released and had a great time during Xmas '06 with family and friends on *Wii Sports*. For the record, my mum (in her 50s) had so much fun, she purchased a DS on the back of it. Nintendo had genuinely redefined the casual gamer! I then lost a little bit of faith in Nintendo brought on by lacklustre launch titles. I wasn't particularly interested in playing another *Zelda* game and was concerned the whole motion-sensing thing was a bit of a fad.

The PS3 arrived and I was swallowed up by the marketing. I preordered and waited with baited breath for the delights of Full HD Gaming, Blu-ray movies and the Cell Broadband Engine. Several PS3 games were purchased and the unit was installed under the main TV in the lounge. The Wii was boxed up and put in the garage. The last eight months have been nothing short of depressing. The most fun I've had on PS3 has been playing *F1 Championship*. The last straw came after *Heavenly Sword*, something I consider to be not much more than shallow eye-candy. I was distraught and seriously considered 'retiring' from gaming, cancelling my **Edge** subscription and spending my spare time doing some productive. Next-gen gaming had been a gargantuan anti-climax.

Hanging my head in shame I trudged to the garage and asked the Wii for forgiveness. We patched up our differences and it was installed once again under the main TV in the lounge. After some sessions on *Resident Evil 4* (and *Zelda*) I'm back enjoying gaming again. It's the PS3's turn to gather dust in the garage. Over to you, Sony – give me something fun to play and I may reconsider my position. There is a space under the TV, albeit in the spare bedroom, with your name on it.
Mike Barber

Not even Sony can deny that there haven't been enough top-drawer PS3 games to date. And will the momentum from the likes of *Ratchet & Clank: Future* and *Drake's Fortune* be maintained? That's the clincher.

I normally hold my peace on such issues, but after reading yet another inflammatory headline, I felt compelled to throw my two cents into the discussion. The piece in question was titled 'Net gaming addiction led to suicide' (Metro, November 2, p33). While I firmly agree with Mr Biffo that we in the gaming community shouldn't simply leap to the defence of videogames in some kind of knee-jerk reaction, I can't help thinking that such woolly thinking and bad logic helps no one. The article suggested that the suicide was caused when the man's 'obsession with roleplaying games got out of hand'. Although tragic, surely blaming games detracts from the fact that the person was clearly not in their right mind. To put it bluntly, people have always killed themselves, and would continue to do so even if such games were not so prevalent. A more sensible view would be to take both the suicide and the obsession as symptoms of the same underlying problems.

In a wider context, headlines such as 'Such and such gun killer was obsessed with violent videogames' are entirely misleading. The emphasis, and the part that really causes concern, should be 'obsessed with violent...' and you can swap in almost any word after that point and still have a disturbing sentence: 'obsessed with violent books', 'obsessed with violent sports', 'obsessed with violent... violence'.

I'm not claiming that videogames don't sometimes have detrimental effects on certain people, but using them as a scapegoat allows us to ignore the real culprits behind the tragedies.

Continued

F

Topic: The best year for gaming in zoinks?

In your own memories does this stand out as a particularly great year? After this year could you see the bars for games necessarily having to be moved higher lest Edge give out more 10s and the fabric of reality be torn asunder?
Lazy Gunn

The year when *Burnout 2*, *Hitman 2*, *TimeSplitters 2*, *Colin McRae 3* and *Pro Evo 2* hit the PS2 was a gem of a year.
Red Dave

2007's been more valuable for tweaking my appreciation – or lack of it in many instances – for the medium as a whole, I think.
Mr. Brooks

Any year which sees games such as *Mario Galaxy*, *Halo 3*, *Orange Box*, *Mass Effect* and *BioShock* has go to be a great year. Especially with support in the shape of *Call Of Duty 4*, *Assassin's Creed* and *Metroid Prime 3*.

Let alone the fact that last-gen is still alive and kicking with *God of War II*, the UK release of *FFXII* and *RE4* Wii-make (well, it is a GC game really). And then there're the handhelds...
monkeyjoe

As a PS3/Wii owner, 2007 has been a great but slow year. Certainly not the best in my gaming career, but I do have to say there are a few releases on the horizon (*Creed*, *Drake*, *Galaxy*) that get me a little giddy. Of course, it's also the year I got to discover online gaming, so that's made my '07 pretty excellent to be sure.
RockIsSponge

1990 was the best year ever for videogames because the might of *Turrican* was released upon the world. You all know this – refusal to admit it just shows how deep in denial you are.
darthjim

The vast majority of the time this is going to be some kind of mental health issue, and the vilification of gaming merely detracts from the efforts we should be expending solving these underlying problems.
Tom Davies

I'm so tempted to save *Mario Galaxy* for Christmas. After all, there's an obscene number of other great-looking titles either recently released or on the way (if ever such a feat of abstinence were possible, it has to be now). To be honest, this is very unlikely – tearing the wrapping off with my teeth combined with an explosion in the boxers is more probable – but it would be great thing to wake up to on Christmas day.

As a kid my memorable gaming moments nearly all coincided with an occasion of some kind. It's how I remember various birthdays. In fact, I scale my whole life alongside big game releases (which is probably terribly sad). I was definitely a kid when *Super Mario World* was released, but for *Street Fighter II*, which arrived just a year or so later, I was a teenager and had discovered boobs. University was *GoldenEye*. Anyway, every 'big' Mario game bar *Mario 64* and *Sunshine* was a birthday or Christmas present. As hard as it is waiting for much-anticipated games to be released these days, it was so much harder knowing they were wrapped up downstairs and not being able to sleep for thinking about them. It was also that much more special when you did get to play, which I miss. These days it tends to be taking a day off work and waiting for console or game X to be delivered. Playing a new game first thing on a Thursday is not the same, nor is waiting for the DHL man a patch on waiting for Father Christmas.

I remember opening my Super Nintendo one Christmas morning, but not being allowed to set it up until after intervening hours studying every illustration and word in the *Super Mario World* instruction booklet. I remember eating so fast I hurt my throat, having to wait for everyone else to finish (they said not until I had eaten), and finally being allowed to set it up on the TV in the spare room. So, after some hasty fumbling with wires and power supplies, and after sternly telling my extended family that I was not to be disturbed, I was playing *Super Mario World* on Christmas Day in the tiny cupboard room with the door shut. It was awesome.
Howard Busby

Aww. And God bless Tiny Tim! (Sniff.)

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F

Topic: What's wrong with racing games

No track creators or level editors. Admittedly, the first thing I'd do is make the Top Gear track, closely followed an ambitious and flawed attempt at one of the more tricky *F-Zero* ones.
Ark_the_Lad

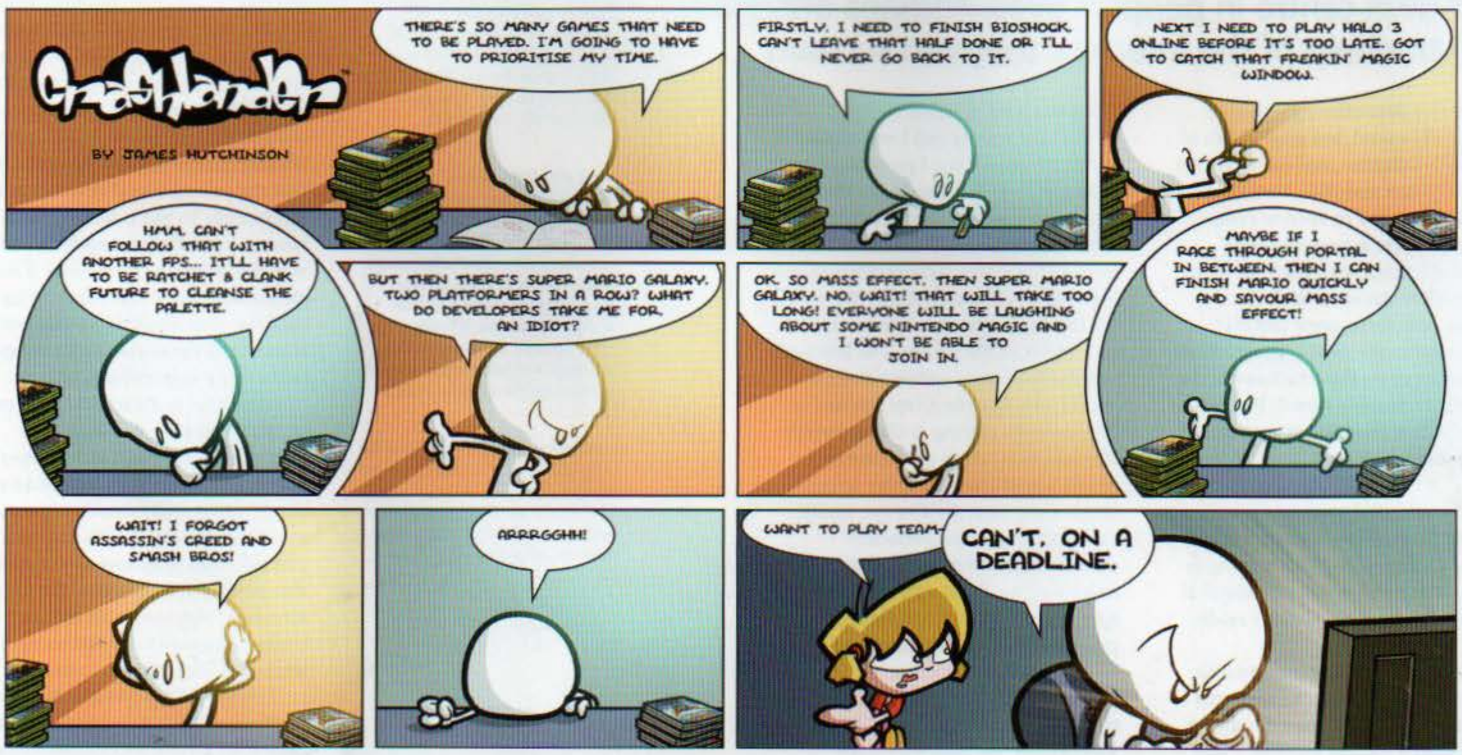
Get *Trackmania*.
Freethinker

A *Trackmania*-style title for consoles would be welcome.
Facewon

I like racing games but I can't help feeling that the genre's plateaued by now. I don't think any other genre gets away with such lack of innovation.
Lightswitch Sam

GET *TRACKMANIA*!
Mr_Shoe_UK

GET *TRACKMANIA*!!!
Subatai



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